If you remain in my word, you will truly be my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free (Jn 8: 31-32).

Whether we are diocesan leaders, parish catechetical leaders, catechists, Catholic school teachers, or, as in my case, one who creates resources for the catechetical ministry, at heart we are all catechists who were first called to be followers of the Lord. In fact, we are useless in our ministry unless we approach it from the firm foundation of our discipleship.

There are many ways, of course, in which each of us comes to faith. The National Directory for Catechesis (NDC) lists at least eight:

1. Human experiences and the reflection upon them
2. Life in a Christian family
3. Participation in a community of faith
4. The witness of the catechist
5. Apprenticeship, where we can learn from the wisdom of another
6. Learning by and with our heart
7. Committing ourselves fully to the person and way of Jesus Christ
8. Fully embracing the daily work of Christian living

Those of us who have been chosen for the catechetical ministry may be a factor in many of these methodologies as we try “to bring about in the believer an ever more mature faith in Jesus Christ, a deeper knowledge and love of his person and message, and a firm commitment to follow him (NDC, 19A). These now-familiar words remind us that our ultimate goal is to inspire our learners to know, love, and serve Jesus, in other words, to be his disciples. But is it ever possible to lead others to Christ if we do not first know him deeply and intimately ourselves? A very quick look back on the evolution of the catechist’s role in the work of the church over the last century will make it clear that the answer to this question is a resounding, “No!”

A BRIEF HISTORY

In my own childhood, the work of the religion teacher was to be the agent for transmitting doctrinal information. (The church had not yet re-appropriated the use of the word “catechist.”) Our teachers assigned questions from the Baltimore Catechism each day and we memorized them each night. We then spent our religion class demonstrating our ability to recite the answers successfully. There might be a few follow-up questions based on simple hypothetical situations, but the answers seemed self-evident to me, and I do not recall being challenged by the demands of the class, though I did have deep theological questions that were never addressed within that confining lesson structure: How could Jesus be both God and a human being? If God was all-good, why didn’t he get rid of the bad people? Why did it seem to be so hard to get to Heaven when there were so many ways to get into Hell? Questions were not welcome and were viewed suspiciously by many of my teachers. The only answer I was ever given was to pray for a deeper faith — and to stop asking so many questions so we could get on with the class.

Yet somehow, I grew in faith, and I have long been convinced that I owe that every bit as much to the personal witness of my family members and to the good women in my Catholic school who formed me in my faith. The methodology may have been limited, but somehow their dedication to follow Christ shone. Their kindness and the values they inculcated in me have lasted a lifetime. The Second Vatican Council brought major advances in the lives of the sisters and in the practice of catechesis. It was one of the great gifts of my own life that I came of age in the immediate aftermath of the Council and that I entered the catechetical ministry as the Council’s insights were first being applied in parishes and schools.

FROM TRANSMITTER TO FACILITATOR

In my own initial formation as a catechist, we learned that the center point of catechesis was the proclamation of the kerygma, the Good News of Jesus Christ, who was the way to the Father. We learned that it was still true that God made us to know, love, and serve him in this world so as to be happy with him in the next. But we also learned that everything in our human experience could be an avenue for knowing God better. I couldn’t be successful as a catechist simply by know-
ing well the doctrine of my faith, though that never ceased to be important. I now had to become an effective facilitator of a process whereby children could learn to reflect on their lives and to see where God was speaking and calling to them through those experiences.

But the most powerful insight that was shared with me was the importance of my own faith journey. I came to understand that unless I had experienced Jesus in my own life, I would not be able to help others to experience Jesus in their own. This may seem self-evident to readers today, but I can remember a long ago time when I would have defined faith solely as an intellectual assent to a body of revealed truths. Now I began to see that unless I had come to make that faith my own, and developed an ability to articulate that experience with commitment and passion, I would never be able to lead others to conversion. My students might or might not care that I could share with them the etymology of the word “eucharist,” but they might learn to love the Mass if I were able to articulate to them with passion my encounters with Jesus Christ there. As Carole Eipers put it on one of the Echoes of Faith videos, if I fall in love with someone, I want to know more and more about them. But if I have never had the opportunity to get to know them, I will never care to explore the depths of who they are and what they say to me. A catechist who is not deeply in love with the Lord will never be effective in a classroom.

Over the past decade, some necessary correctives have been added when some catechists veered too far from an understanding that knowledge of the faith is still a key component in their preparation for their work. The promulgation of the CCC was a stimulus for this re-emphasis. But that, too, can be taken to extremes if we forget that, as Thomas Groome has said, all catechesis begins and ends in life (see his book, Will There Be Faith?).

**Co-workers with the Lord**

Catechesis is primarily a ministry of the word that walks hand in hand with discipleship. The disciples were not only followers of Jesus, they also assisted him in his ministry. Very early on in Jesus’ own ministry, he enlisted them to help him bring his message of peace and forgiveness to a wider audience. He called them to be prophetic witnesses of God’s love for all people. They did not feel any more adequate to their task than we may at times. But their commitment to Jesus compelled them to act in his name. The set forth and simply tried to remember to do as they had seen him do. Many years ago, I heard a beginning catechist protest to Megan McKenna, a catechist of great experience and passion, that she could never do what Megan was able to do in a classroom. “How could I ever begin to do that?” she asked. “Just begin to do what I do,” was Megan’s reply. It really is just as simple as that. We may take small steps at first, and we may stumble and fall, just as a baby does, but over time our practice will begin to lead to the results we seek.

**Learning by Doing**

Great catechists know that their most passionate words may not be successful if they are not authentic and matched by their actions. Adult learners may be surprisingly generous with us sometimes, but young people have a special eye and ear for those who do not “walk the talk.” As I write this I am reminded of something a presenter said once in a workshop. He was actually speaking of the importance of appropriating our learning on a deeper level. He used the example of forgiveness, which happens to be the heart of this year’s Catechetical Sunday theme. “What are some steps toward deepening one’s understanding of a doctrinal topic?” asked one of the workshop participants. The speaker replied, “Well, for example, I
would say that if you want to understand what forgiveness is, try forgiving someone.”

Surely there must be more to it than that! These words can be as hard for us to accept today as they were for Peter when Jesus said them. When Peter asks if he must forgive others as many as seven times, Jesus replies, “I say to you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times” (Mt 18:21-22). Becoming like Jesus takes daily practice. This is as important for us to know as it is for those we teach. If we catechists/disciples are to continue the work of Jesus, we will have to be willing to go out into the deep with him each day, just as he threw himself deeper each day into the mystery of his Father and his Father’s will for the world.

Even St. Paul complained that he often was unable to accomplish what he had set out to do. “For I do not do the good I want, but I do the evil I do not want” (Romans 7:19). Certainly Paul was committed to the risen Lord, but his desire sometimes fell short of his goals. What can help us when we experience the same frustrations?

**The Habits of Disciples**

If we truly want to be disciples of the Lord, we will need to cultivate the habits, attitudes, and actions of disciples, and we will need to put them into practice day by day. To adapt a familiar saying, “Practice makes prophets.” The cardinal virtues of prudence, justice, temperance, and fortitude are the building blocks of all the habits Christians need to cultivate. They are the “powers” of disciples, the skills of those who hope to follow Jesus. We develop these habits that we call virtues so that we can witness them to our learners and thereby help them to make the daily and weekly choices required to follow Jesus.

But as St. Paul also pointed out, we do not develop these habits on our own. It is the Spirit who empowers us, making it possible to stick to our faith choices and so deepen our faith. “I planted, Apollos watered, but God caused the growth” (1 Corinthians 3:6). Paul is pointing out two essential things here. The first is that we can accomplish nothing without God. The second is that we are not solitary disciples. We go to God together, and so we catechize best from the anchor of a strong local catechetical community of faith. The Spirit of God was given to and through the community, not to any of us alone.

Helping young people to experience the joy of Christian community is one of the most satisfying of our tasks. It’s easiest if we have first been part of such a community ourselves. I am involved right now in the movement of the *Echoes of Faith* catechist formation project to an online platform. However, I know well that, helpful though that tool may be, it will not be enough for a catechist unless he or she is also supported by a local community of faith.

I conclude this article on Pentecost. We know from our reflection on the readings for this great feast that the empowerment of the Spirit led the Apostles out into the marketplace to preach the Good News of the Risen Christ. They did it with such passion that all who heard them were able to receive their message, regardless of nationality or language. But over time, the Apostles learned that not everyone had the gift of powerful language. Some did, but others were called to use their gifts differently, in direct service to the poor, in tending to the needs of the young Christian community, or in assisting in the sacramental celebrations. Whether we work in this ministry as catechists or are those responsible for their formation, part of our task is to discern, or help others discern, whether catechesis is truly our gift, or if we are called to an entirely different work in the fields of the Lord.

**From Volunteer to Committed Catechist**

Not all are called to this ministry. The call may have come first from our parish catechetical leader, who had a great need at given moment for a fourth grade catechist, but such a call will not necessarily lead to a lifetime of commitment. We may serve for a year or two and then we move on to other volunteer activities. But some among us decide to remain. Why is that? There are usually many reasons, and I will share briefly the ones that eventually led me to a deeper commitment:

- the opportunity for catechetical and adult faith formation
- a deeper encounter with the word of God in the Scriptures
- an invitation to discernment
- deeper experiences of prayer and worship
- participation in the catechetical community
- the encouragement of trusted mentors
- an inner prompting from the Holy Spirit

The formation of a catechist is critical. It is a responsibility that rests on both the catechist and the catechetical leader. I have watched the formation process in dioceses across the country for many years now and have become convinced that if the formation does not include the elements such as these, it seldom leads to long-lasting commitment.

In more and more places, the quality of the training program for catechists seems to rest solely on a series of discrete courses on various doctrinal topics. Certainly, knowledge of the faith is a key element in formation, since catechists are charged with passing that knowledge on to others, according to the age and ability of their learners. This last point is so important. Throughout the Old Testament we observe the patience of God with the Israelites, as they struggle to understand who is speaking to them. From time to time, they interpret the events in their lives as God’s wrath or judgment, but across the whole of their story stands the gift of God’s abiding love for them. Then in Jesus we find the fullness of all that God wishes to reveal to us. But Jesus brings an even more startling message—we are to be like him. We are to do as he has done, and even greater works! (See John 14:12.)

A tireless national workshop presenter, Irene Murphy, helped to train many catechists of my own generation. She gave only one basic workshop, though it might be named differently from diocese to diocese as she traveled. The theme was always the same—Jesus, the Teacher. Over her lifetime, she helped thousands of catechists to understand the basic elements of following Jesus in the catechetical ministry:
A basic knowledge of the faith
Skills for sharing faith
A personal relationship with the Lord
A strong moral core
A supportive community
An abiding love for your learners

**Humility and Dose of Courage**

To that I would add that a good catechist needs a unique combination of humility and courage. First, we need the humility to understand profoundly that our work is not our own, that it is only the Spirit promised by Jesus who is working through us. But if we have discerned the call to this wonderful ministry, then we need the courage to step bravely into the deep with Jesus and follow where he leads. Karl Rahner, one of the great architects of the theology of Vatican II, once asked which the believer would rather have: “the small island” of our own knowledge, or to be cast out on the “sea of mystery” (*Foundations of Christian Faith*, page 22). He was talking about a worldview, an approach to Christian identity, a willingness to be carried by God to places we might otherwise be afraid to go. My challenge this week might only be to enter bravely into a room full of second graders, but so be it. I will go in, armed with the best knowledge and skills I have been able to acquire, a deep love and respect for my learners, and an assurance that I am not facing their active, inquiring faces alone.

Jesus said of himself that he had come to light a fire in people’s hearts (see Luke 12:49). St. Catherine of Siena, a Doctor of the Church, expressed it this way in a letter: “If you find what God wants of you, you will set the world ablaze.” What is it that God wants of each of us? That is the great question of human life. We catechists are engaged in one of the most vital ministries of the Church: the ministry of the word. This ministry of the Church requires special gifts that take a lifetime to acquire, and never fully.

Catechists are armed with a story to tell—the Story of Jesus Christ and his saving work and message. We are called to assist in summoning forth a life commitment from our learners at a particular moment in time, using the persuasiveness of our words and the power of our witness. We are helping our learners to confront the same question we have asked ourselves. What is it that God wants of each of us? To assist others in confronting the question is a great gift. If we are able to do so, we have joined a great cloud of witnesses for a moment in time. In so doing, we can make a difference in the faith lives of others again and again. What more could we want? I

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