

The Role of the Teacher Catechist

"The person of the catechist is the medium in which the message of the faith is incarnated" (*Sharing the Light of Faith: National Catechetical Directory for Catholics of the United States. - Conclusion*). Through our entire being we are responsible for making Christ alive for our students.

"No methodology, no matter how well tested, can dispense with the person of the catechist in every phase of the catechetical process. The charism given to him [her] by the Spirit, a solid spirituality and transparent witness of life, constitutes the soul of every method. Only his [her] own human and Christian qualities guarantee a good use of texts and other work instruments.

The catechist is essentially a mediator. He [she] facilitates communication between the people and the mystery of God, between subjects amongst themselves, as well as with the community. For this reason, his [her] cultural vision, social condition and lifestyle must not be obstacles to the journey of faith. Rather, these help to create the most advantageous conditions for seeking out, welcoming and deepening the Christian message. He [she] does not forget that belief is a fruit of grace and liberty. Thus, he [she] ensures that his [her] activities always draw support from faith in the Holy Spirit and from prayer. Finally, the personal relationship of the catechist with the subject is of crucial importance." (*General Directory For Catechesis #156*)

Our role as catechist is a holy and noble vocation. To take on such a role holds many challenges for us; thus, we need to:

1. have a faith that interpenetrates our life
2. pray
3. continue to actively seek growth as an adult Catholic
4. celebrate the sacramental and liturgical life of the Church
5. share in the life of our parish community
6. give witness to the Gospel
7. serve the community
8. be willing co-learners, in community with our students, their families and the Church
9. seek out relationships that will nurture us in this vocation
10. be committed to continual development of our skills and abilities as teachers.

When we are committed to accepting these challenges we will then be facilitating catechesis that "is the whole process by which a Christian community informs forms and ever transforms itself and every member in lived Christian faith." (*Thomas Groome*)

To be catechist means to echo Good News; it is a great, wonderful, mysterious challenge that God has graced us to accept.

Content

Following is a presentation of the four components of catechesis outlined in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*.

The Profession of Faith *The Profession of the Christian Faith*

"Who has encountered Christ desires to know him as much as possible, as well as to know the plan of the Father which he revealed. Knowledge of the faith (*fides quae*) is required by adherence to the faith (*fides qua*). 24 Even in the human order the love which one person has for another cause that person to wish to know the other all the more. Catechesis, must, therefore, lead to "the gradual grasping of the whole truth about the divine plan", 25 by introducing the disciples of Jesus to a knowledge of Tradition and of Scripture, which is "*the sublime science of Christ*". 26 By deepening knowledge of the faith, catechesis nourishes not only the life of faith but equips it to explain itself to the world. The meaning of the Creed, which is a compendium

1. The teachings of the Catholic Church
2. History and traditions
3. Catholic identity

The Celebration of the Christian Mystery *The Sacraments of the Faith*

"Christ is always present in his Church, especially in "liturgical celebrations". 27 Communion with Jesus Christ leads to the celebration of his salvific presence in the sacraments, especially in the Eucharist. The Church ardently desires that all the Christian faithful be brought to that full, conscious and active participation which is required by the very nature of the liturgy 28 and the dignity of the baptismal priesthood. For this reason, catechesis, along with promoting a knowledge of the meaning of the liturgy and the sacraments, must also educate the disciples of Jesus Christ "for prayer, for thanksgiving, for repentance, for praying with confidence, for community spirit, for understanding correctly the meaning of the creeds.....", 29 as all of this is necessary for a true liturgical life (*General Directory For Catechesis* #85).

1. Sacraments
2. Liturgical seasons and feasts

Life in Christ *The Life of Faith*

"Conversion to Jesus Christ implies walking in his footsteps. Catechesis must, therefore, transmit to the disciples the attitudes of the Master himself. The disciples thus undertake a journey of interior transformation, in which, by participating in the paschal mystery of the Lord, "they pass from the old man to the new man who has been made perfect in Christ".³⁰ The Sermon on the Mount, in which Jesus takes up the Decalogue, and impresses upon it the spirit of the beatitudes, ³¹ is an indispensable point of reference for the moral formation which is most necessary today. Evangelization which "involves the proclamation and presentation of morality", ³² displays all the force of its appeal where it offers not only the proclaimed word but the lived word too. This moral testimony, which is prepared for by catechesis, must always demonstrate the social consequences of the demands of the Gospel:

1. Baptismal call
2. Community
3. Morality
4. Charity and Social Justice

Christian Prayer *Prayer in the Life of Faith*

"Communion with Jesus Christ leads the disciples to assume the attitude of prayer and contemplation which the Master himself had. To learn to pray with Jesus is to pray with the same sentiments with which he turned to the Father: adoration, praise, thanksgiving, filial confidence, supplication and awe for his glory. All of these sentiments are reflected in the *Our Father*, the prayer which Jesus taught his disciples and which is the model of all Christian prayer. The "*handing on of the Our Father*" ³⁴ is a summary of the entire Gospel ³⁵ and is therefore a true act of catechesis. When catechesis is permeated by a climate of prayer, the assimilation of the entire Christian life reaches its summit. This climate is especially necessary when the catechumen and those to be catechized are confronted with the more demanding aspects of the Gospel and when they feel weak or when they discover the mysterious action of God in their lives. (*General Directory For Catechesis* #85)

1. Prayer traditions
2. Scripture
3. Worship
4. Discernment

Approach and Methods

Once we have identified *what* we are to teach, it is critical to take the time to develop our own understanding of the content and to plan *how* we will structure the learning experience in order to guide our students. Pope Paul VI succinctly stated that our "methods must be adapted to the age, culture and aptitude of the persons concerned, they must seek always to fix in the memory, intelligence and heart the essential truths that must impregnate all of life." (On Evangelization in the Modern World #44) As we face this task we must also remember that Jesus has promised to be with us in this process and that He plants the seed that we are called to water. We are instruments of the Spirit.

A Process for Planning (individually or as a team)

1. Personal study of content.
2. Establish an atmosphere of prayer
3. Be familiar with desired outcome(s)
4. Reflect on what meaning that outcome has in your own life
5. Assess where your students presently are vis-à-vis this outcome
6. Gather resources, including approved Archdiocesan program
7. Decide how you will assess whether the outcome has been achieved
8. Create a learning opportunity

Choosing the Experience

The possibilities are endless but there are factors to consider in order to keep our teaching rooted and balanced.

In *Catechesi tradendae*: on Catechesis in Our Time (John Paul II, October 16, 1979) four characteristics of catechesis are outlined:

1. Catechesis "must be *systematic*, not improvised but programmed to reach a precise goal." (CT #21)
2. Catechesis and *life experience* cannot be separated. (CT #22)
3. "Catechesis is intrinsically linked with the whole of *liturgical* and *sacramental* activity." (CT #23)
4. Catechesis needs to be nurtured within *community*. (CT #24)

Keeping these points and the mandate "to fix in the memory, intelligence and heart, the essential truths" before us we can develop activities that will foster a *living* faith in our students.

The following outline the ways and means of facilitating catechesis. All are important and should be incorporated into any unit of Religious Education.

Scripture Sharing

When we reflect and share on God's Word it becomes "living" for us. God's Word becomes a constant source of nourishment and challenge not a static, intellectual pursuit. It takes root and lives in both heart and mind. If our students are encouraged to ask, "What is God saying to *me* in this passage?" and "What am I called to be?", they will, we hope, begin a life long desire to be touched by God's message.

Lectionary based catechesis, Liturgy of the Word with Children, and Groome's Shared Praxis approach are wonderful ways to experience Scripture with our students. (See appendix for outlines of each approach)

Prayer

Children have a natural sense of God's presence in their lives and allowing them frequent opportunities to nurture that relationship through various forms of prayer is vital. Each prayer experience should be approached with a sense of awe, mystery and reverence. Prayer as "living with God" should be emphasized. So often talking and listening become the focus and we forget that "Prayer is the habit of being in the presence of the thrice - holy God" (CCC#2565). This is the fundamental gift of prayer.

We need to guide the students to see that prayer should envelop our lives. On this foundation various forms of prayer can be explored: blessing and adoration, prayer of petition, intercession, repentance, thanksgiving and praise, as well as the expressions of prayer: vocal, meditation and contemplation. Children should be given opportunities to experience and respond to prayer through song, gesture, dance, art, drama, writing and spontaneous prayer.

Storytelling

Jesus is the consummate storyteller. Children have a wonderful sense of this art, also. We, as teachers, need to foster the ability to listen to another's story and, as importantly, to tell our own. We can then enter more deeply the mystery that is our life with Jesus. We can appreciate the turns, twists, lessons and surprises that are behind, in and before us as we journey with God.

Liturgy and Celebration

We know that we cannot teach an experience, it must be lived. The rich sacramental and liturgical tradition of our Catholic faith provides some of the most profound moments in our lives. The Eucharist is "the source and summit of the Christian life". (Lumen Gentium #11) therefore our catechesis should lead our students to desire to celebrate the Eucharist as well as the other sacraments.

Rituals such as an Advent wreath service, classroom prayer rituals, a retreat for confirmands, the Rosary are all opportunities for our students to understand that our faith interpenetrates our lives. Other experiences such as a tree planting ceremony, a class birthday, a school's anniversary can be designed to reflect the integration of our faith in daily life and celebration.

Art Forms

Creativity can give voice to God within us. Little children freely create and express themselves through music, song, dance, drama and art. Our students, in an environment of trust, care and respect, need to continue to be in touch with that creative expression. We need to encourage students to take risks and to experience various art forms simply because they are a way to celebrate one's relationship with God and not just because one has a particular creative talent. We need also to share our own artistic expression with our students as well as that of other more well-known artists, in order to spark that mysterious, God-like, creative process.

It is expected that planning and assessment follow the [CISVA Toolbox for Teachers: Implementing Curriculum](#).