

The Six Tasks of Catechesis #3: Moral Formation, or Living Out Our Faith

The third of the Six Tasks of Catechesis is moral formation, or in terms of the remembering phrase HELP ME, living out our faith. Read what the bishops say:

Jesus' moral teaching is an integral part of his message. Catechesis must transmit both the content of Christ's moral teachings as well as their implications for Christian living. Moral catechesis aims to conform the believer to Christ—to bring about personal transformation and conversion. It should encourage the faithful to give witness—both in their private lives and in the public arena—to Christ's teaching in everyday life (NDC 20).

In order to promote moral formation, we need to practice what we preach. In writing about the formation of catechists, the bishops speak of one who “is a model of Christian virtue and a courageous witness to the Catholic faith” (NDC 55). That’s a tall order. Imagine recruiting catechists by saying, “I’m looking for someone who is a model of Christian virtue.” Yet these are the people we need and seek. Notice the bishops don’t say *perfect people*, but rather *models*. We all fall short, but we need to be mindful that our behavior at the supermarket, the soccer fields on Saturdays, and even when we are driving, needs to reflect our Christian virtues. A courageous witness is one who speaks compassionately of forgiveness when others are intolerant or who volunteers to chaperone the field trip to the zoo and takes the most active group. The witness is the DRE who patiently listens to the parent who comes in late to register four children, three of whom are late for First Holy Communion, and is caring for a terminally ill parent and doesn’t know how she can add one more thing to her plate but desperately wants to get her children back into classes. And the witness is the person so confident in God’s forgiveness that he rushes to the tomb (or admits to his family, class, or friends) when he fails as that model of living out our faith. Part three of the CCC and chapter six of the NDC focus on how to live and teach the Christian life.

How Do We Promote Moral Formation in the Classroom?

Several years ago I attended a youth ministry workshop in which the presenter spoke of the need for us as catechists to teach DIKETKWJWD before we do WWJD. In other words, before we ask “What would Jesus do?” we need to ask, “Do I know enough to know what Jesus would do?” The foundation of moral formation is this second question.

Look at the scope and sequence of your textbook series. There are grades that put a heavy focus on moral formation, typically second, fourth, seventh, and tenth grades. However, it is present in every grade level as the core teaching in various lessons, and it is present in every single lesson. The final step in any catechetical lesson should be the challenge of “So what?” or a sending forth to put what was learned into practice. How

often do we send students out but don't check on how they did? Take a look at Mark 6:30–31. Jesus had sent the Twelve out to “walk the talk” they had learned. They gather with Jesus and they talk about how it went. They get gold stars and are called Apostles for the only time in this Gospel. Why? Because they had “witnessed” the faith, the root meaning of “Apostle.” Too often we fail to gather the class together at the beginning of the next lesson to ask how the practice of the previous lesson went.

Moral decision-making needs to be a four-step process.

1. Something happens that makes us ask, “What should I do?” Before acting we need to take two additional steps.
2. We need to reflect on the options by looking to some reliable resources, including Scripture, Church teachings, advice from trusted people, and prayer to the Holy Spirit for guidance.
3. We evaluate the various options based on our resources and prayer and make a decision.
4. Only after all this should we act. Most of the time, this doesn't require us to pull out a book, or even a phone, because over the years we have studied these resources so we can simply stop and think for a moment and realize, “I do know enough to know what Jesus would do,” and the decision is easy. Our task as catechists is to help our students learn these resources and practice turning to them.

Being mindful of children's developmental stages and how they make moral decisions at those stages is crucial to being successful. Often in counseling frustrated catechists about their classes, I have to remind them that they are forgetting that the children can't understand adult reasoning. Here again the catechist manuals are wonderful tools. They give age-appropriate reasoning, role-play exercises, and a host of other tools to tap into the class's reasoning skills.

Micah beautifully sums up the hoped-for outcome of this task of moral formation: “He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?” (6:8)

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