



# Building Blocks for Mission

## 2. Catechesis

*Were not our hearts burning inside us as he talked to us on the road and explained the Scriptures to us? (Luke 24:32)*

**E**vangelization and catechesis go hand in hand. Through the Church's ministry of evangelization, we hear the Good News of the Gospel and are introduced to the living Christ. We are called to a conversion of mind and heart as we learn to walk along the path that Christ sets before us. Catechesis builds upon conversion and aims to deepen our relationship with God. Catechesis helps us to know the person, the message, and the mission of Christ so that our entire lives are Christ-centered. As St. Paul said so beautifully, "It is no longer I that live, but Christ who lives in me." (Gal 2:20). In other words, the primary purpose of our catechetical efforts is to deepen our relationship with the Lord. It is not simply passing on doctrine, as important as that is, but nurturing a relationship with God that stirs up our hunger for the truth.

The Church has always valued enlightened faith. This means that faith is more than just a matter of feelings or emotions and certainly more than just one's personal opinion. There is objective truth that has been revealed to us by Jesus Christ. The Church teaches this truth through its ministry of the word, its commitment to catechesis at all stages of life. Our Catholic schools, our Catholic universities and all of our religious education programs for adults and children rest on the belief that a deeper understanding leads to a stronger faith. The more we come to know our faith, the better our faith can resound within us and move us to put it into practice.

### Obstacles and Misperceptions

Catechesis is multifaceted. There is first of all a catechesis that introduces us to the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Catechesis brings us to the Cross and draws us into the mystery of Christ's Resurrection. There is also a catechesis for discipleship as we learn to practice our faith in society, working for peace and justice and learning to live a holy and virtuous life.

We may be most familiar with the catechesis we receive in preparation for the sacraments. An effective sacramental catechesis stirs up the gift of faith and predisposes us to receive the sacraments worthily and fruitfully. Catechists prepare youth for Confirmation, an RCIA team catechizes catechumens in preparation for the initiation sacraments, a minister of care pre-

pares a homebound parishioner for the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick. Whether it is a young couple preparing for marriage, a first communicant, or parents preparing for the baptism of their child, effective catechesis fosters faith.

### We Are All Catechists

The ministry of catechesis is not reserved for a few professionals or trained volunteers. We can all be catechists in the daily experiences of life. Parents, for example, have primary responsibility for instructing their children in the ways of faith. A child first hears the name of God from the lips of his/her parents. We can be catechists in the workplace when coworkers ask us questions about the Church or a neighbor in a time of crisis questions the love and mercy of God. Our own ongoing catechesis helps us to be prepared for these unexpected opportunities for catechesis.

### Life Is Also a Teacher

The Catechism of the Catholic Church is an excellent resource. However, our growth in faith is not limited to what we find in a book. At every stage of life and with every experience, we have a new opportunity to integrate the Gospel and the teaching of the Church into a spirituality by which we can live. At times of crisis and loss, for example, our faith can be tested. But with prayer, counsel, and a deeper examination of what we believe as Catholics, we can arrive at a stronger faith and commitment to Christ. We can also be of enormous help to one another in getting to know our faith better as we walk together on our journeys of faith.

Catechesis for adults is critical because the questions we have as adults are not the questions we had as children. Life introduces new questions, doubts and challenges. We need to create a climate in which parishioners are not afraid to raise their questions or to seek help to understand what many parishioners may take for granted. We must meet learn how to meet people where they are in their faith journeys. The way in which we approach catechesis for someone who is just beginning to believe in God is necessarily different than for someone who already has a strong belief in God. We need to foster a climate in our parishes in which individuals will feel comfortable raising questions without fear of judgment.



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### Contemporary Catechesis Calls for Creativity

The challenge of our modern times requires us to be creative in the ways in which we foster faith and pass on the teaching of Christ and his Church. Pope Benedict XVI made a strong appeal for using modern technology in passing on the faith. The Pope said:

“New horizons are now open that were until recently unimaginable; they stir our wonder at the possibilities offered by these new media and, at the same time, urgently demand a serious reflection on the significance of communication in the digital age.”

The impact of modern technology today is as revolutionary as the invention of the printing press, and we can no longer look at using these new technologies and media as an option or luxury if we are to reach younger generations. Pope Benedict led the way and Pope Francis has continued to engage the world in new ways through Twitter and other media. In our local church of Chicago, Fr. Robert Barron has reached many new people through Word on Fire Ministries, including podcasts of homilies, reviews of popular movies, as well as the *Catholicism* series that aired nationally on PBS.

While those efforts are on a much broader scope than what is likely reasonable in our individual parishes, we must follow their lead and consider where we need to seek new opportunities and methods of engaging in catechesis. A traditional classroom format is not the only forum for catechesis. Are there other models for catechesis that we haven't explored? Do we need to reconsider how we train catechists for our parish programs? Do we presume to teach the faith in the same way we teach history, science or math? What are the obstacles that get in the way of communicating the faith of the Church? How do we engage the whole family in ongoing catechesis? Different age groups and cultures may learn differently, so our catechetical approaches need to be adapted to accommodate different learning patterns.

### We Are Catechists Together

What can we learn from the pastoral experiences of our neighboring parishes? Collaborating with neighboring parishes in offering creative programs for adults and children may be more effective than if every parish created and planned its own programs.

The National Directory for Catechesis presents us with six primary tasks for catechesis. We can assess the strength of our parish's efforts in relationship to these six tasks of catechesis:

- Promoting knowledge of the faith;
- Promoting a knowledge of the meaning of Liturgy and Sacraments;
- Promoting moral formation in Jesus Christ;
- Teaching how to pray with Christ;
- Preparing the Christian to live in community and to participate actively in the mission of the Church;
- Promoting a missionary spirit that prepares the faithful to be present as Christians in society  
(National Directory for Catechesis, #20)

From these six tasks we can begin a review of our parish's catechetical ministry. The above tasks present only a preliminary overview, however. It is the responsibility of each parish to fill in the blanks, to seriously consider what needs to be presented. We are not training future theologians, but rather we are training disciples who will be confident enough in their own faith to effectively pass on to others the joy of believing.