ADULT FAITH FORMATION

General Introduction

The General Directory for Catechesis (GDC), Our Hearts Were Burning Within Us: A Pastoral Plan for Adult Faith Formation in the United States (OHWB) and the National Directory for Catechesis (NDC)—in conjunction with previous catechetical documents—have increased our understanding of catechesis and the place of adult faith formation within the Church’s mission of evangelization. Even the most cursory reading of the signs of our times points to an urgent need for Christians to proclaim the Good News, to serve as living examples of the presence of the Kingdom of God already at work in our midst and to become beacons of hope for its future fulfillment.

Since all Christians share in this mission, the aim of all catechesis is the formation of adult Catholics who are mature in their faith and prepared to bear witness to the gospel in the concrete circumstances of their lives at home, work and, indeed, in every social setting. That is why the Church strongly advocates a life-long process of faith formation for its members and views the catechesis of adults as the central task of its catechetical enterprise.

Catechesis for adults, since it deals with persons who are capable of an adherence that is fully responsible, must be considered the chief form of catechesis. All the other forms, which are indeed always necessary, are in some way oriented to it. (GDC, #59)

From a practical standpoint, this means that adult faith formation must be given priority over catechesis with children and youth. This is not to suggest that the commitment to catechesis with children and youth is diminished. It does, however, indicate that the best strategy for ensuring an adequate faith formation for the younger members of the faith community is to focus more attention on the formation of adults than has been done in the past.

The goal of adult faith formation is to foster mature adult faith. The GDC indicates the qualities that characterize mature faith as “living, explicit and fruitful” (GDC, #82). A living adult faith will continue to grow and develop over time, learning from experience and adapting to changing circumstances. And, like all living things, it will need ongoing nourishment, such as that found in the study of Sacred Scripture and Tradition, prayer, and involvement in the life and mission of the community—especially through participation in the sacraments and in service to others.

If it is explicit, then it will be readily evident in one’s life-choices that one has embraced the values, beliefs and lifestyle of a follower of Jesus Christ. If it is fruitful, then one’s faith will be manifest in active discipleship and not mere words alone. It will achieve practical results, having real impact on the lives of others who may be burdened with the effects of social injustice or seeking spiritual healing and a faith community to call their own.

Baptismal Catechumenate as Model

The National Directory for Catechesis, following the General Directory for Catechesis, looks to the baptismal catechumenate as the inspiration for all catechesis in the Church (GDC, # 59, 91, NDC p. 115ff). As such, certain elements should be evident. The catechumenate focuses on the importance of fostering a climate of welcome and hospitality in the process of initiation and
intentionally reaches out to others who have yet to be evangelized. Catechesis is presented gradually, systematically and comprehensively in accordance with people’s faith development, needs and life circumstances and by employing principles of adult education. It comes to fruition in meaningful celebrations of the worshipping community and is deepened and more fully appropriated through its members’ experience of mystagogy, or their ongoing reflection on these sacred mysteries.

Integrally linked to the Church’s liturgical symbols and rites and nourished by faith-sharing, the process is permeated by a sense of the paschal mystery – the central, saving experience of Christ’s death and resurrection. It thereby enables one to engage in the gradual process of being transformed in Christ and becoming more closely identified with the mind of Christ and his mission, going beyond mere instruction to include a holistic process of information, formation and transformation in the faith.

Rooted in the community, this process is the responsibility of the entire parish. It encompasses both initial and ongoing conversion. It is the place where the Good News of Jesus Christ truly becomes inculturated, being expressed in such a manner that it connects with people’s lives in real and relevant ways. It nourishes and strengthens persons in an apprenticeship in living as disciples of Christ who actively practice their faith for the sake of God’s reign in the world.

**Adult Catechesis**

“A family is our first community and the most basic way in which the Lord gathers us, forms us, and acts in the world” (*Follow the Way of Love*). For centuries this treasured teaching was under-emphasized, but was reintroduced by the Second Vatican Council. The Christian family is called a domestic church, or “church of the home,” sharing in the mission of the Church.

The domestic church, a true expression of the Church, carries out the mission of the Church in very ordinary ways of its daily life. One important task parents engage in is the spiritual development and education of their children. Their role according to Vatican II, is so important that “it is almost impossible to provide an adequate substitute.” They serve as their children’s first and foremost educators as they impart the first knowledge of the faith. In that formational process, the parental example is the most effective way to teach.

Because parental involvement is so vital to the success of and the very nature of the domestic church, the need for ongoing adult faith formation is vital, even crucial.

In keeping with the *GDC*, the *NDC* asserts that adults “have a right and duty to bring to maturity the seed of faith sown in them by God.” (*GDC*, #173, *NDC*, p. 187) Both documents make clear that catechesis must take into consideration the age, level of development and the life circumstances of those being catechized in order to determine the readiness and approaches to be utilized. Beyond relying on the baptismal catechumenate as the model for all catechesis, the *NDC* further specifies the guidelines for adult catechesis previously set forth in the *GDC*. It provides the goals, tasks and content of adult catechesis and suggests principles to guide the selection of methodologies for effective implementation (*NDC*, p. 188 ff).

Just as children have differing intellectual and developmental needs, so do adults. Therefore it is important to consider the varied needs of adults to more effectively catechize and strengthen them for their mission in the domestic church and the Church universal. Effective catechesis is
truly attentive to its audience; thus, all adults cannot simply be lumped together into one category and treated the same. That is why the NDC gives special consideration to the catechesis of two groups: the elderly and young adults.

The NDC points out that adult faith formation should not neglect the catechesis of elders. Often, the gifts of elders may be overlooked. With the appropriate attention and formation, the elderly can contribute to the overall catechetical mission of the parish, just as they can contribute in other pastoral and liturgical ministries.

Elderly people themselves can provide some of the most effective catechesis for the aged. They should be offered equivalent opportunities for formation that are provided all catechists. Such programs give them a chance to discover the storehouse of wisdom within themselves, and, like the head of the household in Matthew’s Gospel, to bring forth from that storehouse “both the new and the old.” (NDC, p. 195)

Elders are able to offer insight and perspective on essential matters of meaning that no other segment of the community can provide. Their years of experience can prepare them to impart to others the gift of ongoing growth in knowledge and wisdom within the context of Christian faith. Moreover, elders have a unique potential in terms of catechizing among groups in intergenerational settings and thereby can make invaluable contributions to the well-being of the family in a time when family life faces a number of challenges. As RCIA sponsors, they can bring great richness to the baptismal catechumenate. The NDC provides a number of principles to include in any comprehensive program developed specifically with elders in mind. (NDC, p. 194)

As in the case of the elderly, young adults also have many gifts to share that can be tapped for the benefit of the parish and the Church at large. Young adults are at a critical stage in their lives and stand in need of proper catechesis to navigate their faith journey successfully.

Ordinarily, in the period of early adulthood, young adults make some of the most important decisions in their lives about their Christian vocation, their career, and their choice of a spouse. These choices condition and often even determine their futures. Effective catechesis will assist young adults in examining their lives and engaging in dialogue about the great questions they face. Catechesis with young adults helps them to make these crucial decisions in accord with God’s will and their Catholic faith. (NDC, p. 196)

*Sons and Daughters of the Light: A Pastoral Plan for the Ministry with Young Adults* outlines a full range of strategies to achieve the goals of connecting young adults with Jesus Christ, with the Church and its mission in the world and with a peer community. (See [www.usccb.org/laity/ygadult/toc.shtml](http://www.usccb.org/laity/ygadult/toc.shtml)) *The Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults* continues to be an important way for young adults to begin to be, or to become more, involved in the practice of their faith by completing their initiation in the Catholic Church or serving as sponsors or catechists in the process. Preparation of young couples for marriage and preparation for the baptism of their children are key moments to reach out and evangelize young adults. A few parishes offer young adult groups for socialization, service, prayer and catechesis.

Technology offers a key instrument for catechizing young adults since this age group is growing up in a computerized world. Some methods for reaching these technologically savvy young people include: a dynamic and interactive parish web site; text messaging, IM and blogging;
e-mail lists for parish communications; online distance learning programs and webinars.

Social events for singles as well as for families hold prime potential for incorporating a catechetical component, e.g., “Theology on Tap”, which addresses issues and topics related to the Catholic faith in a fun and casual environment. Through these and other means like peer ministry, mentoring adolescents, involvement in a variety of retreat models, service projects, or a diocesan young adult conference, young adults can be helped to recognize and develop the vital part they have to play in the Body of Christ.

Parish leaders are encouraged to contact the diocesan Office of Youth and Young Adult Ministry (www.cdeducation.org/oym) for assistance in their ministry with young adults.

There are many different movements in the Adult Life Cycle. Please note 12.4 for more information about the tasks within the adult life cycle.

**Who is Responsible for Adult Faith Formation?**

According to *OHWB*, the entire parish is responsible for adult faith formation. That being said, the pastor bears the pastoral and spiritual responsibility for catechesis and for ensuring the authentic presentation of the faith to adults in the parish, as stated in the [Code of Canon Law](see #519, #528). Parishes, however, can designate an adult faith formation leader (authorized by the pastor) to assume primary responsibility for implementing the catechetical ministry with adults. Since the pastor’s role, together with his pastoral staff, is to lead the whole parish and to serve in many areas, the parish needs someone other than the pastor to give this ministry the attention it deserves, just as the parish should have a lead agent to take hands-on responsibility for the catechesis of children and youth.

An adult faith formation team plays a vital role. *OHWB* reminds us, “no person acting alone can adequately meet the needs and fulfill the potential of parish adult faith formation ministry.” (*OHWB*, p. 48) This team collaborates with the adult faith formation leader in planning and providing learning opportunities for adults, and should provide a diverse, cohesive and comprehensive approach to this ministry. The team helps “to identify the principal spiritual and human needs of adult parishioners, discern the learning possibilities inherent in those needs, and develop a vision and plan for parish adult faith formation.” (*OHWB*, p. 49) Additionally, the team offers ongoing evaluation of how the aforementioned plan is being implemented to ensure that the needs of the parish community are continually met.