



Why Religious Education Assessments Are Important in the New Evangelization and the Year of Faith

An Explanation of Religious Assessments and Their Benefits

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February 7, 2013

The ability to articulate our faith and put it into practice is key to the New Evangelization, the church's effort to "re-propose" the Gospel to the world. The Year of Faith (October 11, 2012 to November 24, 2013), provides us an opportunity to reflect on our faith and its importance in our lives.

As Pope John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI have explained, the modern world's turn to secularism has made it difficult for the ordinary Christian to hold onto faith – meaning belief in God – and to practice faith – meaning engaging in acts of worship, charity and justice.

A logical outgrowth of the church's efforts to awaken faith in people is the need to examine catechesis, which is the teaching of Christian truths "with a view to initiating hearers into the fullness of Christian Life" (Prologue of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*).

It is not enough to impart head knowledge of the faith; catechesis aims to create believers who put their faith into action in the world, and who are doing so as joyful members of the church.

The goal, then, of Catholic catechesis is clear: to create committed disciples of Jesus Christ who understand and practice the Catholic faith. But how do we know if catechesis is achieving this goal?

Assessment – a method of measuring knowledge and practice – can tell us in an objective way whether we are helping people

establish saving relationships with Jesus and becoming committed, knowledgeable Catholic Christians.

Assessment is helpful in two ways: it is an objective way to take stock of an individual's faith knowledge and practice and it tells us the strengths and weaknesses of the religion curriculum being used.

Since the 1970s, NCEA has been helping educators in Catholic schools and parishes assess how well their programs of religious education are doing in forming committed Christian disciples.

NCEA provides two assessment tools, one for students and one for adults. "Information for Growth" (IFG) is the adult tool. The newly named and revised "NCEA IFG: ACRE edition" is for children/youth. This student assessment tool will debut in September 2013. The previous student assessment tool was called NCEA ACRE and was released in 2001.

Assessing a person's knowledge and his or her practice of church teaching is a straightforward task. The first sections of both the student and adult assessment tools each ask questions on cognitive areas like doctrine, Scripture and morality. The second sections of both IFG and NCEA IFG: ACRE edition ask about behaviors and attitudes like Mass attendance, personal beliefs and habits of prayer.

This comprehensive approach provides an assessment of both an individual's standing as a

disciple, and the effectiveness of a religious education program at forming disciples. By assessing both individuals and programs, we can evaluate the degree to which the New Evangelization is taking hold.

What is the Difference between Assessment and Testing?

Assessment is different from testing. Assessment is a larger concept, of which testing is a component. Think of an annual physical exam conducted by a physician. The doctor “assesses” your overall health by conducting several tests, such as a stress test, a cholesterol test, listening to your heart, etc. The results of the individual tests, when considered together, help the doctor assess how healthy you are.

In a similar way, the results from the two sections on faith knowledge and faith practice provide the data a religious educator needs to assess the health of a person’s life as a disciple. Taking it one step further, we see that when the scores for a group or class are considered, the assessment tools give the data needed to evaluate a program of religious education.

Tests and assessments are different in what they are designed to do. A test discovers what a person knows or doesn’t know about a specific topic. An assessment is a kind of summary of several tests and reveals how well a person has integrated head knowledge about a subject into a set of skills and attitudes that result in desired behaviors. At the group or class level, assessment reveals how well we are passing on the faith. Are we effectively teaching the truths of Catholicism? Are we instilling habits of prayer, Mass attendance and acts of charity? Are catechists effectively witnessing to the life-giving love of God?

It is helpful to remember that the task of catechesis falls primarily to parents, while catechists and the faith community remain key players in passing on faith to others. Measuring the effectiveness of our religious education programs is important if we are to ensure that each individual receives a good foundation in faith.

Assessment Is Something that Jesus Did

Jesus assessed the maturity of the apostles’ discipleship at Caesarea Philippi, when he asked them two questions: *Who do people say that I am?* and *Who do you say that I am?* (Matthew 16:13-15). These two questions mirror the two dimensions of assessment that NCEA’s faith assessments provide: faith knowledge and faith practice.

The question, *Who do people say that I am?*, reflects the faith knowledge section of NCEA’s assessment tools. Does the individual taking the assessment know about Jesus and what the church teaches? For example, can the student identify the seven sacraments?

The question, *Who do you say that I am?*, reflects the faith practice section of the assessments. What does the individual taking the assessment actually believe and put into practice? For example, does he or she receive the sacraments on a regular basis?

When the results of both questions that Jesus asked (which correspond to the faith knowledge and faith practice sections of the assessment) are considered together, they provide insight into the goal of catechesis, which is to form committed disciples of Jesus Christ. We gain insight into whether a person is living as a committed Christian or not. At the group or class level, we gain insight into whether our religious education program, on the whole, is forming committed Christians or not. Based on this information, we may choose to enhance or change something in our catechetical program.

Why Assessment is Helpful for Catechists

Here are several reasons why catechists should conduct regular faith assessments with adults and children attending their catechetical programs.

Catechesis is Important – Knowing our faith is important, and assessing catechesis shows others that it is as important a subject as Math or English. Knowing our faith helps us to know and love God more deeply. When we love God, we naturally want to share our faith with others. Catechesis is important because it is the necessary precursor to evangelizing –

sharing faith – with others who do not yet know the Good News of Jesus.

Effective Catechesis Requires Grace and Skill – Teaching faith is a special gift that not everyone has, and requires development of that gift through education and training. The *General Directory for Catechesis* (GDC) makes this point clearly when it says that the catechist, empowered with special charisms from the Holy Spirit, is indispensable to every phase of catechesis (GDC 156). Further, *The National Directory for Catechesis* (NDC) says a professionally trained catechetical leader is the single most critical factor in an effective program of catechesis (No. 54.5).

Provides Credibility – Assessment provides credibility to a catechetical program by demonstrating through impartial, scored reports the level of faith knowledge and practice of a group of students or adults. These yearly reports, over time, can show whether a program is effective in passing on the faith.

Identifies Program Strengths and Weaknesses – Assessment tools like IFG and ACRE help educators know exactly where the strengths and weaknesses are in their catechetical programs. The GDC identifies six tasks of catechesis:

- Knowledge of the faith
- liturgical life
- moral formation
- prayer
- communal life and
- missionary spirit.

Each of these categories is assessed, helping the educator know exactly what areas students know well and what areas need extra attention. Making decisions with this knowledge leads to wise program development.

Minimizes Scapegoating – Often, well-intentioned people try to determine whether catechesis is effective based solely on personal observation and anecdotal stories. In some schools and parishes, one catechist or one method becomes a scapegoat – “This is the

reason we are not catechizing effectively!” A lot of energy is wasted playing the blame game.

Enables Data-informed Decisions – IFG and ACRE take the guessing out of evaluating program effectiveness. These assessment tools provide objective data with which educators can make informed judgments. Strategic decisions can be made about how to improve catechetical programs based on information, not hunches.

Reflective practice – Regular assessment provides a periodic opportunity to reflect and take stock of one’s catechetical program. It builds into the structure of the program year a time to pray and to critically examine each component of catechesis:

- texts and materials
- length of class
- number of sessions in a year and
- enrichment opportunities.

It allows time to think about the people who are participating in catechesis. How could our participants be better served, and God better honored, by adjusting each catechetical component?

Faculty Development with IFG – Sometimes, it is not enough to use a new textbook or lengthen the religious education session in an attempt to improve catechesis. Sometimes, faculty development is the key to renewing and revitalizing catechesis. Catechists cannot pass on what they do not possess. If catechists are deficient in their knowledge of church teaching, or if they are inconsistent in practicing their faith, then catechetical leaders need to take these factors into account when making program and curriculum decisions. In other instances, catechists may need new tools and strategies in order to better connect with those with whom they work.

Information for Growth, NCEA’s assessment tool for adults, can provide exact information regarding the strengths and weaknesses of catechists to the Director of Religious Education or other leader. IFG sends the catechetical leader a report showing a

summary of the group's responses. Confidential scored reports are also sent to the individual adults taking IFG, but the catechetical leader never receives these individual reports, only a group summary. Using the group report, a catechetical leader can pinpoint faith knowledge strengths and areas of growth and design methods to address these issues in the group by building on strengths and shoring up weaknesses.

Conclusion

In the New Evangelization and especially during the Year of Faith, assessment of programs of religious education is necessary to discover if we are actually accomplishing our goal of forming committed, knowledgeable Catholic Christians.

- Assessment tells us if we are assisting students and adults to live the life of grace offered to us in Jesus Christ through the Church.
- It helps us know what we are doing well and what needs improvement.
- It provides us a regular opportunity to reflect on our ministry of catechesis.

The assessment tools offered by NCEA, Information for Growth (IFG) for adults and

NCEA IFG: ACRE edition for children and youth, help religious educators evaluate their catechetical programs in two main areas: faith knowledge and faith practice. IFG and NCEA IFG: ACRE edition provide objectively scored group reports, allowing catechetical leaders to make data-informed decisions about the strengths and weaknesses of their programs.

The act of assessing, not guessing, shows students, parents, catechists, clergy, the educational community and the faith community that religious education is important and worthy of our best evaluative tools.

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