

A New Approach to Children's Catechesis: Come, follow me

Authored by [Sr. Hyacinthe DeFos Du Rau](#) in [Issue #1.1](#) of *The Catechetical Review*

At the 2015 St. John Bosco Conference for Catechesis and Evangelization this summer, Sr. Hyacinthe will offer training for this new catechetical program, written by members of the Notre Dame de Vie institute in France, an institute with whom Franciscan University's Office of Catechetics has enjoyed a close institutional relationship. This article provides an overview of this children's catechetical program and demonstrates its continuity with the Holy Father's vision for catechesis.

Catechesis is a proclamation of the word and is always centred on that word, yet it also demands a suitable environment and an attractive presentation, the use of eloquent symbols, insertion into a broader growth process and the integration of every dimension of the person within a communal journey of hearing and response. [\[1\]](#)

This short but rich paragraph from Pope Francis' apostolic exhortation encapsulates the essential principles upon which *Come follow me* catechesis is founded. *Come follow me* is a catechetical program for children aged 7 to 11 developed in France by Notre Dame de Vie Institute in the last 30 years, and published recently in French and partially in English (Years 1-2). We are now going to take the main aspects of Pope Francis' description, and, in a brief overview, see how they are applied in *Come follow me*.

Proclamation of the Word

In many catechetical resources, Holy Scripture is proclaimed and used in great ways to introduce or illustrate a doctrinal or moral aspect, or to confirm a point of teaching. Here however Pope Francis tells us that catechesis *is* a proclamation of the Word and *is centred* on that Word.

The content of *Come follow me* is the Bible, read according to the Church's interpretation under the light of the Holy Spirit. *Come follow me* simply opens the Word of God to the intelligence of the children, in a dialogue which leads them to discover and accept in the same movement the reality and presence of Jesus in their own lives, as well as the truths of the faith.

However, *Come follow me*'s direct and 'simple' approach to the Word of God is not left to chance or spontaneity. Not only is the text prayerfully studied with the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, and the questions asked from it carefully prepared, but the choice of the biblical texts is structured in a Trinitarian and Christocentric movement and determined according to the psychological maturity of the children. This choice of text also follows the liturgical year, and respects the order and flow of Scripture itself (the Gospels are proclaimed in the order in which they are written).

Here is an illustration of the proclamation of the Word of God in *Come follow me*, with a short extract taken from the year 1 Catechist's Book, *Live as Children of the Light* (7 year old onwards), session 22. (The words of scripture are underlined: Luke 11:1.)

THE SESSION

Let us prepare our hearts. Let us listen to the Word of Jesus.

Moment of silent prayer. The catechist will have prepared the figures of the apostles and the name "Lord". Then the figure of Jesus praying is put in place, without explanation. This is done with quiet background music. After a moment of silence, the catechist reads:

*"One day, Jesus was praying in a certain place" Moment of silence, and then
"when he had finished, one of his disciples said to him,"*

The catechist places the sentence: "Lord, teach us to pray" and asks the children:

Do you understand what is happening? *Let the children reflect.*

Why do the apostles ask Jesus to teach them to pray? *Let the children answer.*

They already know how to pray to God! But when they see Jesus praying, the apostles understand that this is something new. They would like to be able to pray like Jesus. Jesus is going to fulfil their great desire..."

Suitable environment

Through the use of two spaces, the space of fraternal life and the place of Meeting with God, the children are given the freedom to move from one to another. This allows the children to remain in silent prayer with God for as long as they want after the proclamation of the Word, while those who have finished praying can meet in the space of fraternal life to engage in an activity related to the theme of the session.

This use of space also develops the children's understanding of the sacred and profane. Many children in our own Catholic school (Lymington, United Kingdom) are not Catholic or never go to church. Yet they begin to enter the place of Meeting with great respect and in silence as they learn to receive and respond to the Word of God in a prayerful atmosphere. Our school does not have a chapel, and so we have to set up our "place of Meeting" in the gym, which is probably the place least conducive to prayer

and recollection. Yet the transition from gym to place of Meeting with God is possible: one day, in the classroom that serves as "place of fraternal life," I stood corrected as I invited the children to come to *the gym*. One of them immediately said, "No! To the place of Meeting!"

Attractive presentation and eloquent symbols



The card silhouettes are one of the most immediately striking aspects of *Come follow me*. They are used to lead the children to an interior understanding of the Word of God and to respond to it. Each session comes with a set of silhouettes which are displayed soberly and beautifully to help the children adopt the attitudes of faith, hope, and love they illustrate.

The horizontal and vertical features of the wooden kit helps the children to gain a sense of the transcendence of God and of his action in the world.

At the heart of the display, which is the center and focus of the Place of Meeting with God, is the Bible, placed in honor. Candles and light are used to signify the presence and the action of God, who speaks to us in his Word and comes to us in Jesus. This first sensorial and meaningful experience of the sacred awakes the liturgical sense of the children.

Insertion into a broader growth process

As fundamental catechesis (35 sessions each year during 4 years, from the age of 7 to 11) *Come follow me* is not only concerned with the transmission of the faith to the children, but also with their growth, as inseparably human and Christian persons.

This is shown by taking account of the intellectual, social, and spiritual maturity of the children at different ages, and an emphasis on the development of the human and theological virtues. Here is a short summary of the 4 years.

Year 1 (7-8) Age of reason with a discovery of our capacity to know and think (intelligence), of the gift of faith that enables us to know God, of our conscience that enables us to listen to God, and of the virtue of prudence. This year, built on the theme of mercy, introduces the Sacraments of Baptism and Reconciliation.

Year 2 (8-9) The “social” age of first relationships, with a discovery of our capacity to love and choose (will), of the gift of charity that enables us to love God, of our conscience that enables us to do what is good, and of the virtue of justice. This year, built on the theme of communion, introduces the Sacrament of Holy Eucharist.

Year 3 (9-10) The age when we “find our roots,” with a discovery of our capacity to remember (memory), of the gift of hope that enables us to trust God by remembering his mercy, of our conscience which seeks the truth, and of the virtue of self-control. This year, built on the theme of the Word of God, introduces the Liturgy of the Church and the Sacrament of Holy Orders.

Year 4 (10-11) The age when we first consider our future, with a discovery of our freedom and of the Person of the Holy Spirit who makes us free and enlightens our conscience. This year, built on the Holy Spirit introduces the virtue of courage and the Sacrament of Confirmation.

Integration of every dimension of the person

The pedagogy used in *Come follow me* takes account explicitly of the various dimensions of the person, from the physical to the spiritual. God in Christ has taken on the whole of our human nature and has redeemed the whole of our human nature. No dimension of our person is indifferent to God, nor should be left unattended by grace.

Part of the catechists’ training for *Come follow me* involves a short “anthropological” formation. We first learn to attend to the children’s physical needs, to the awakening of their five senses, as a way to help them become aware of their interior senses. This leads them to the discovery of their own capacities to know, to love, to remember, to choose, and to further an even greater discovery of the grace of God in them: the gifts of faith, hope, and charity that they learn to recognize and use. The children’s gradual discovery of their own person, as a unity of body and soul touched by grace at every level, is fundamental to the pedagogy of *Come, follow me*.

Within a communal journey of hearing and response

The essential methodology of *Come follow me* is a dialogue with the Word of God proclaimed by the catechist in the name of the Church and under the breath of the Holy Spirit. As the children hear and respond to the Word of God, they journey together towards holiness, throughout these fundamental years of their lives, between the age of 7 and 11.

What response do the children give? Here are some responses from catechists who have used *Come follow me*:

- **Integration of the Faith** They are attentive, focused, and remember the Word of God, to the point that they are able to make connections between the different words and events recorded in the Bible. Their faith becomes integrated. They invite other children to catechesis and begin to evangelize their own families.
- **Sacramental Life** Although *Come follow me* is not a sacramental preparation program, it introduces the sacraments in relation to the person of Jesus, the action of the Holy Spirit and the Church. Sacramental themes run through the four years in most of the sessions. As a result, the children themselves ask for the sacraments, expressing a deep understanding and desire for baptism, confession, first Holy Communion.

- **Moral Life** Devoid of moralism, *Come follow me* has a profound impact on the children. Parents, teachers, and catechists see signs of moral change in their behavior to each other and within their own school and family setting. The teaching on conscience, but also the familiarity with grace and the application of the Word of God to their own life in each session, encourages a response to the Word in deeds as well as in words.
- **Prayer Life** This is perhaps the most visible response of the children to *Come, follow me*. Each session ends with a time of prayer, which the group begins together. Then the children are free to remain in prayer or join the others for a common activity related to the theme of the session. Naturally, not all the children stay to pray, but there will always be some to stay one, two, five or even ten minutes, in complete silence, to be in the presence of Jesus. This opportunity given to the children is the most moving evidence of the Holy Spirit in their lives and is one of the most essential aspect of *Come follow me*. Here, the proclamation of the Word of God bears all its fruits, in the response of prayer freely given.

Rooted in Notre Dame de Vie's Carmelite spirituality and developed under the breath of the Holy Spirit, *Come follow me* is a catechesis highly adapted to the challenges and demands of modern society. It provides both a structured and comprehensive teaching of the truths of the faith and a profound respect of the personal freedom and maturity of the children. Here the children truly experience the joy of the Gospel and share it with others. As one parish catechist recounts:

During the year, the children bring in their classmates to catechesis. They are aware of experiencing things that touch them deeply in their hearts and want to share this joy with their friends...We have finished the year with more children than we had started with, which is completely new for us; the children evangelize each other...Because nowhere else do they find such spiritual experience.

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[1] Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, art. 166.

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