

What is a Catechist? by Fred Shellabarger

A catechist seeks to promote the Church's efforts to make disciples of Jesus Christ as commissioned by our Lord, Jesus Christ, "Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you" (MT 28:19-20). The Church declares, "Catechists are truly the pride of the missionary Church;" a "praise worthy army of lay apostles." Furthermore, Pope St. John Paul II affirms that the endeavors of catechists constitute a "fundamental evangelical service." Indeed, "from the very beginning of Christianity and wherever there has been missionary activity, catechists have made, and continue to make, "an outstanding and indispensable contribution to the spread of the faith and of the Church" (GC1).

First, it must be understood that by virtue of their baptism, every Catholic shares in the responsibility of advancing the Kingdom... catechists participate in this mission and call in an additional and unique way. "At the origin of the catechist's vocation... there is a specific call from the Holy Spirit, a mandate. It is important for the catechist to recognize the supernatural and ecclesial significance of this call" (GC2).

Secondly, it must also be stressed that the key to success in catechesis is not a program in and of itself. Although there is an increasing abundance of dynamic and powerful catechetical media and programs, it is the *person of the catechist* that is indispensable! "No methodology, no matter how well tested, can dispense with the person of the catechist in every phase of the catechetical process... The catechist is essentially a mediator. He [or she] facilitates communication between the people and the mystery of God... [T]he personal relationship of the catechist with the subject is of crucial importance." (GDC 156) Catechists are important because they play a vital role in the formation and growth of the faithful, and throughout history, have had the essential function of proclaiming the Gospel in its fullness and handing it on to the next generation.

Furthermore, catechists are important in the lives of those they catechize because often, it is catechists who demonstrate to them firsthand, the *authenticity of life* that is fitting for the faithful. (NDC 54). Catechists in many ways help them to form and shape their conscience. It is to him or her that they look for an example of life in Christ. The catechist is also fundamental in the communal life of the Church and beyond. The catechist is a community builder. "Catechists, by their very mission, are necessarily involved in this aspect of the apostolate and should promote an ecumenical spirit in the community, beginning with the catechumens and newly baptized" (GC 14). The catechist tries to establish an atmosphere conducive to evangelization and catechesis. "His [or her] cultural vision, social conditioning and lifestyle must not be obstacles to the journey of faith. Rather, these help to create the most advantageous conditions for seeking out, welcoming and deepening the Christian message... He [or she] ensures that activities always draw support from faith in the Holy Spirit and prayer" (GDC 156). The catechist, like Paul, is able to adapt to his audience; that is, to their needs – he [or she] meets them where they are (1 Cor 9:22). The catechist must always be mindful of this responsibility to foster these "suitable conditions which are necessary for the Christian message to be sought, accepted, and more profoundly investigated" (NDC 54), St. Augustine himself noted this in his *First Catechetical Instruction* and this is a vital component in the Ecclesial Method of catechesis recommended in our Diocese.

In many ways, this fostering of suitable conditions is rooted in building relationship and establishing trust. First, on the most basic level, and as the example of such great saints as St. John Bosco demonstrate, there is no substitute for the relationship that catechists have with their audience. Indeed, the call to make disciples necessitates that the catechist have healthy and vibrant relationships with those the catechist is seeking to catechize. Catechesis must always be seen as the deepening of relationship and in turn, discipleship; undoubtedly, catechesis exists for discipleship and the making of authentic and intentional disciples is the fruit of good catechesis.

Thirdly, considering the goals of catechesis, it is *vital* that catechists actively pursue their own intimate relationship with Christ. Catechists are trying to bring others into a deeper relationship with Christ. It is

important that they also continually experience this deeper relationship and communion with Christ. As Bishop Nickless reminds us, “We cannot give what we do not have; we cannot fulfill our mission to evangelize, if we ourselves are not evangelized.”^[1] Indeed, Pope Francis challenges us, “I invite all Christians... to a renewed personal encounter with Jesus Christ, or at least an openness to letting him encounter them; I ask all of you to do this unfailingly each day” (EG3). Furthermore, he reminds us, “The primary reason for evangelizing [and catechizing] is the love of Jesus which we have received, the experience of salvation which urges us to ever greater love of him” (EG 264). To be sure, a catechist must first seek to know Jesus Christ, have a sincere desire to proclaim Him (to evangelize) and a true desire to lead others to faith in Jesus Christ. At the same time, in terms of personal growth and lived faith, the catechist is mindful of his or her own formation; evangelization and conversion are a life-long process. They are a pilgrimage of faith that lasts the course of one’s entire life. These “encounters” with Christ are a vital part of that journey; indeed, food for the pilgrimage, drawing us deeper into communion with Christ. The catechist seeks to foster this realization and desire in the catechized as well.

Moreover, catechists must remember that they transmit the teaching of Christ (GDC 98). Christ is the “one teacher,” whose message is identical with himself. His words do not merely express the word of God; he is the Word of God” (NDC 19). With this in mind, catechists can be seen as mediators of Christ, that is, of his word, and since his person and his word are inseparable, mediators of Christ himself. This is why it is so important that catechists be faithful in teaching Christ. Catechists, in this sense, make present Christ the Teacher by virtue of the fact that catechists are uniquely gifted by the Holy Spirit (GDC 156). Catechists, then, should strive to present *faithfully* the whole deposit of the faith, mindful of the fact that *method serves the content* (GDC 149).

Finally, to be a catechist is to commit one’s self to the following mission:^[2]

- Striving to be a model of Catholic Christian faith and lifestyle
- Deepening one’s own knowledge and understanding of the truths of the faith
- Making Jesus Christ the center of all teaching and the center of one’s own life personally
- Teaching intentionally for discipleship
- Developing the skills and methodology to communicate the faith clearly, authentically and appropriately to the age group to whom the catechist ministers...
- Assisting those they teach to connect their faith to life and their lives to faith
- Leading persons to prayer, worship, community and mission
- Developing the skills to be both an evangelizer and a catechist
- Participating in formation opportunities and certification processes provided by the parish, school, and diocese
- Knowing and abiding by the parish, school, and diocesan guidelines and policies promoting effective catechesis and administration”

^[1] Bishop R. Walker Nickless, *Ecclesia Semper Reformanda*

^[2] Jeanne D. Schrempf, *The Person of the Catechist*,

<http://www.21stcenturycatholicsevangelization.org/uploads/5/1/6/4/5164069/article6.pdf>