

Handbook for Today's Catechist

- ☞ *The role of the catechist*
- ☞ *Planning effective lessons*
- ☞ *Sharing the faith*

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CALLED TO BE A CATECHIST

The National Archives in Washington, D.C., provides visitors with an extraordinary opportunity to be in close proximity to treasured objects from the tradition, culture, and history of the United States. Once patrons navigate the electronic screenings and bag searches, they are invited to read about and to view the invaluable treasures, original documents, and precious heirlooms that comprise the history and traditions of our country. Some of these precious treasures are heavily guarded and secured under glass. Any attempt to get too close or to touch these priceless holdings will set alarms ringing and guards running.

You have been called to be a catechist, entrusted with a privileged ministry. You have been called to hand on the precious treasure of the Catholic faith to countless young people. This priceless gift of faith is not like the static, lifeless museum pieces that can only be read about and viewed through glass barriers. The treasure which you hand on is the living and active faith, passed down from the time of the Apostles until now. This incorruptible treasure is meant to be experienced,

shared, and spread as good news for all people. This living, dynamic gift of faith is meant to be touched and to touch.

In responding to the call to be a catechist, you are not alone; you join hundreds of thousands of committed Catholics who have answered the call to serve. You have responded to the call because you love the Lord Jesus and you desire to share that love with young people. Perhaps your call was not as dramatic as the call to Moses from a burning bush, or as astounding as the call to Paul, who was knocked from his horse, or as life-changing as the call to Peter, who was asked to leave his livelihood. Your call may have come from a conversation with the parish director or from a flicker of interest as you read a bulletin announcement containing the annual request for catechists.

The manner in which you received the call is not important. What is important is that you have said “yes.” That tiny yes has very grand implications. In giving that yes, you are responding to your baptismal call to be a disciple, to follow Christ, and to teach in his name. Pledging to use your gifts and talents to lead others to Christ, you answered the interior call of the Holy Spirit to serve in a specific ministry in the Church (see *National Directory for Catechesis*, hereafter *NDC*, 228).

There is no reason to be fearful or afraid to accept this call and responsibility. You can trust the Holy Spirit for inspiration; you can look to Jesus, the model teacher, for guidance; you can rely on your parish director for assistance; and you can count on experienced catechists at your parish for support.

A word about terminology: the term “catechesis” is the word used by the early Church to express how it handed on the teachings of Jesus and the faith of the Church. It comes from the Greek word *catechein*, which means “to echo.” Catechists

are those who echo the teachings of Jesus and the faith of his Church and hand them on to believers.

As a catechist, you are tasked with communicating God's message in its entirety and in fidelity to Church teaching, so you want to be as prepared as possible to take on this ministry. Basic formation courses, workshops, and conferences will increase your knowledge and skills. Catechist meetings will provide necessary information regarding the parish curriculum, guidelines, and procedures. Such meetings also offer opportunities to meet other catechists and to share information and ideas.

Catechists Participate in an Ecclesial or Church Ministry

Catechists accept an important role in the evangelizing and catechizing efforts of the Church as they are called and sent by the Church to hand on the faith of the Church (see *NDC* 241–242). Since catechists serve in an ecclesial or Church ministry, they must be practicing Catholics who live a life that is consistent with Church teaching (see *NDC* 228–229). They possess a personal commitment to Jesus Christ as the center of their lives, and they strive to strengthen that commitment through an active prayer life. Catechists demonstrate their deep love for the Church through active participation in its liturgical life. Catechists are committed to teach in the Roman Catholic tradition and to participate in the community life of the parish. They are faith-filled persons who have a strong awareness of God's presence in their lives and who witness to that presence in word and example.

Since catechists serve in a Church ministry that involves minors, they are screened and are required to participate in

safe environment training. Catechists willingly comply with these regulations because they understand the importance of protecting children and providing a safe environment where young people can learn.

Jesus the Model Teacher and Catechist

Jesus Christ is the teacher and catechist par excellence. When the American bishops issued a pastoral message on Catholic education, they titled it *To Teach As Jesus Did* (1972). This intriguing title provides both a mandate for catechists to fulfill and a goal to which catechists can aspire. Jesus the model teacher provides a model and example for all catechists.

Jesus the teacher knew his material well, and he spoke and taught with authority. He understood the Hebrew Scriptures and taught his listeners about the great love, forgiveness, and compassion of God, his Father. Jesus knew his audience and taught them according to their needs. After teaching the crowds, Jesus gave his disciples more in-depth instruction on points they misunderstood. He was an excellent storyteller who often used parables to teach the mysteries of the kingdom. Jesus used questions to probe the hearts and minds of those he encountered; he was gentle with those who genuinely sought answers. But Jesus did not hesitate to debate with persons who were hypocritical or cynical—he often answered their tricky questions with challenging new questions that left them speechless.

Jesus used simple examples from the everyday experience of the people to teach deep truths. His catechetical toolbox included the birds of the field, sheep, shepherds, coins with Caesar's imprint, the tears of a woman, fish, fishing nets, lamps, lamp stands, seeds, trees, grass, water, yeast, bread,

vineyards, and wine. Jesus did not confine his teaching to the walls of the synagogue. The world was his classroom, and he made use of every opportunity to teach—weddings, funerals, crowded hillsides, deserted places, well-traveled roads, stormy seas, public gatherings, and private dinners. Jesus was sensitive to people's needs and taught about the kingdom through miracles, healings, and exorcisms. He went beyond the taboos of his time; he touched the untouchable, he spoke with women deemed unclean, he welcomed the marginalized, and he ate with sinners.

In the time of Jesus, students chose the teachers under whom they would study. But Jesus chose his own students to teach and to apprentice. Jesus was a charismatic leader—with just a few words of invitation, his disciples left their families and their work and followed him. He often sought seclusion in order to pray and nourish his relationship with his Father. Jesus taught his disciples to pray and to call God their Father. For three years, he explained the mysteries of the kingdom to his disciples. Jesus modeled ministry for them, he entrusted them with his own mission, and finally he sent them out to continue that mission.

Jesus did not choose perfect disciples to accomplish the monumental work of the kingdom. The synoptic Gospels portray a rather dismal and embarrassing picture of the rag-tag group of disciples Jesus called. They consistently misunderstood the message and needed it repeated over and over again. The disciples asked for high places in the kingdom; they were afraid and lacked trust. One of these chosen disciples betrayed Jesus, and others denied him and abandoned him at his most difficult hour. Yet Jesus chose them, he forgave them, and he continued to work with them. Jesus molded these weak and

insecure disciples into the small but powerful group of leaders who would go out and change the world.

Even though you may achieve marvelous results with young people, you are not expected to be a miracle worker! However, you are expected to be an effective communicator of the message. Allowing Jesus, the model teacher, to mentor you can increase your effectiveness. Following his approach, you will learn about your students, their diverse backgrounds, and their individual needs. You will use examples from their everyday experiences to teach the truths of the faith and to relate those truths to their lives. You will answer questions and repeat the message until it is clear. There will be times when you will abandon a prepared lesson in order to bring love, forgiveness, or compassion to a situation. You will teach young people how to pray and how to be disciples, and you will be challenged to be an example of what it means to be a Christian.

In accepting the call to be a catechist, you will strive to increase your knowledge of the teachings of the Church and to grow in your understanding of how to hand on the precious treasure of the living faith. You will learn more and more about Jesus, your mentor and your model. You will deepen your own call and your commitment to follow Jesus Christ who “...is at once the message, the messenger, the purpose of the message, and the consummation of the message” (*NDC 4*).

FOUNDATIONAL PRINCIPLES OF CATECHESIS

As a catechist, you want to be aware of some basic and foundational principles that influence the ministry of catechesis. These principles are culled from recent Church documents, provide guidance and direction for catechetical ministry, and offer valuable background information for catechists. But these documents are not intended for direct use with children. Three important catechetical documents provide the basis for the principles of catechesis and are referred to throughout this catechist handbook:

- The *Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC)*, published in 1994, is a compendium of the faith organized in four parts: the Creed, the sacraments, the life of faith, and prayer.
- The *National Directory for Catechesis (NDC)*, published in 2005, provides diocesan and parish leadership with guidelines and standards for catechesis in the United States.
- The *United States Catholic Catechism for Adults (USCCA)*, published in 2006 and based on the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, consists of stories, doctrinal teachings,