

Fostering Faith Catechist Formation Insert

Catechesis: 1 hour



Completion of this study entitles the catechist to one hour of credit toward certification.

CATECHESIS: Jesus, the Early Church & the Effective Catechist

THEME

A consideration of effective catechesis, in light of Jesus and the ancient tradition of the Church.

CATECHIST COMPETENCIES

As a result of this study, the catechist will be able to

1. express catechetical values of Jesus and the early Church.
2. articulate qualities that foster effective catechesis.
3. reflect on one's own catechetical ministry and consciously develop a style that integrates the person of Jesus and the wisdom of the early Church.

CATECHISM REFERENCES

#4-10

FOCUSING THE STUDY

Catechetical ministry is as old as the Church itself. To catechize effectively, one must understand the tradition in which it is rooted, as well as the cultural context and the practical challenges that face the minister.

INTRODUCTION

Have you ever had to try to explain to someone who a *catechist* is or what *catechesis* is? These terms certainly aren't familiar terms to everyone, even among Catholics. "Catechesis" was a word used in the first centuries of Christianity to describe the process of communicating Christian faith to people. In its Greek origin, it meant, "to echo the teaching."

Though that information might satisfy the merely curious, it certainly does not tell the whole story of what catechesis is about, or who catechists are called to be in the life of the Church. Perhaps it is good for those of us in this "catechetical" ministry to reflect more deeply on the place of catechesis in our faith and what makes for effective catechesis. For our limited purposes here, let us explore two particularly important sources of our faith tradition, Jesus and the early Church, in hopes of enriching our understanding of the privileged role we have as catechists.

Jesus and the Church: Our Great Catechetical Role Models

In the Gospels we find that Jesus, the divine catechist, uses parables (interesting stories with a surprising twist and a moral lesson) to challenge and inspire, to persuade and teach. Jesus knows the "law," but his style is not that of a lecturing professor. His command of Jewish faith allows him a freedom and an ease, not only to preach, but also to be truly present to the people and situations he encounters, keenly sensing and generously offering what is needed in each present moment. His spiritual core, nourished by a profound intimacy to the Father, gives Jesus a blend of authority and approachability that makes him uniquely attractive.

It can be said that Jesus proclaimed the coming of God's kingdom more with his presence than with his words. Countless times we find that his compassion is more grace-revealing than the most eloquent recitation of the Torah. As catechist, Jesus embodies the Gospel. Through his person, God's relevant, personal and life-changing revelation of "good news" has the power not just to influence minds but to actually change hearts.

The catechetical/initiatory process of the early Church provides insight into some important qualities of catechesis. (In fact today's RCIA, the Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults, is patterned after this process, commonly referred to as the "catechumenate.") Someone coming into the Church, the "body of Christ," was viewed as being on a profound journey with both personal and very public implications. In fact, the community saw itself as companions of these inquirers to Christianity and supported them with prayer and their presence.

One was brought very slowly, often over the course of three years, to the knowledge of who Christ was, and what it meant to be a Christian. Access to the "sacred mysteries" of the faith, both in theological truth and in the liturgical celebration of these truths was granted gradually and carefully, according to one's demonstrated spiritual readiness. Such access was understood to be a great privilege. When the catechumen was deemed ready by those representing the community, the Easter sacraments of Baptism (including what is today Confirmation) and Eucharist would be conferred. The baptized were "putting on" Christ, in the Risen Lord, yes, but in the community of Christian disciples as well. Essential to the lifestyle of the early believers into which the catechumens were catechized was sincere piety, sharing in the Eucharistic meal, and attention to the temporal and spiritual needs of all. And even after three years or so of catechesis toward initiation, there was still further reflection and continued integration into full practice of the Christian faith and lifestyle. Indeed, catechesis was deeply connected to ongoing adult discipleship. Living holy and authentic lives in the saving embrace of divine mystery was the vocation of each Christian.

Fostering Faith Catechist Formation Insert

Drawing upon these catechetical models, namely the person of Jesus and the process of the early Church, Catholic catechesis has undergone a significant renewal in recent years. Receiving its impetus from the Second Vatican Council (1961-65), the Church has sought to reclaim its ancient vision of catechesis as a social (as well as individual) process of drawing the **entirety** of the human person into conversion to Christ and to his Church. With the grace of the Holy Spirit, catechesis informs Catholics, but also **forms** Catholics of spiritual and moral depth, who possess an ardent desire to integrate their knowledge of Christian truth into a lifestyle of discipleship.

The catechetical renewal has broadened the focus of catechesis from an almost exclusive emphasis on doctrinal content. Catechesis now seeks to intertwine the elements of our rich Catholic heritage (Scripture and liturgy, social teaching, spirituality and the arts, to name a few) to offer a coherent, consistent and relevant system of faith that can touch both head **and** heart, one that reveals the full, transformative power of the Gospel. And this process is as relational as it is holistic and systematic. Just as in the first generations of Christianity, Christ is today known and experienced in the sacramental presence of the community. Thus, only in and through that community (that is “Christ’s body”) can catechesis fully occur.

In the end, the great evangelical/catechetical mandate of Christ (“Go, therefore, and make disciples of all the nations...Teach them to carry out everything I have commanded you.” Mt 28: 19-20) is an invitation to trust in the presence of his Spirit, believe in the authority of his Word, and join in his Mission. It demands of us a vision to not only see lives transformed by catechesis, but, indeed, entire **societies** brought into fidelity with God’s will. In its fullness, catechesis more than teaches us **about** the kingdom Jesus so desired. It challenges us to see the “Kingdom of God” already in our midst, and inspires each of us to take our place in the fray of struggling to make it an ever-greater reality in our homes, in our workplaces, and indeed, in all the nations.

How exciting, how challenging, how wonderfully sacramental is the ministry we share as catechists!

FROM CHURCH DOCUMENTS...

Catechesis is an education in the faith of children, young people, and adults which includes especially the teaching of Christian doctrine imparted, generally speaking in an organic and systematic way, with a view to initiating the hearers into the fullness of Christian life. (Catechism of the Catholic Church, #5)

Catechesis is nothing other than the process of transmitting the Gospel, as the Christian community has received it, understands it, celebrates it, lives it, and communicates it in many ways. (General Directory for Catechesis, #105)

...This comprehensive formation includes more than instruction: it is an apprenticeship of the entire Christian life, it is a “complete Christian initiation...” (GDC, #67)

...At the heart of catechesis we find, in essence, a Person, the Person of Jesus of Nazareth, the only Son from the Father...full of grace and truth, who suffered and died for us and who now after rising, is living with us forever. ...The primary and essential object of catechesis is...the mystery of Christ. (On Catechesis in Our Time, #5)

The fact that Jesus Christ is the fullness of Revelation is the foundation for the “Christocentricity” of catechesis. (GDC, #41)

Qualities Of An Effective Catechist

Having briefly considered Jesus and the early Church for understanding what catechesis is and what it seeks to accomplish, let us explore some traits of an effective catechist. Certainly, down through the centuries, salvation history reveals countless role models and styles of effective catechesis. So, in today’s context of the Archdiocese of Chicago, what might be some generally applicable qualities that are the mark of an effective catechist? Here are some that come to mind:

The effective catechist...

- **...is a sincere person of faith.**
- **...ministers, not in isolation, but in relationship.** The catechist operates in dialogue with the parish catechetical leader, other catechists and parishioners, parents and other family members.
- **...desires opportunities to be further formed as a person of faith.** The catechist sees herself as a “work-in-progress,” seeking to deepen her catechetical skills, theological understanding, and spiritual development.

Fostering Faith Catechist Formation Insert

- **...prepares sufficiently for catechetical sessions.** The catechist believes those he serves deserve his very best effort and that lesson preparation is the foundation for a positive session...for everybody.
- **...prays for oneself and for those being catechized.** The catechist understands that alone she can do something; with the Holy Spirit she and her learners can move mountains.
- **...possesses a love for those being served and understands where they are in their development.**
- **...sees oneself both as a medium of our Catholic “good news” and as the message.** The catechist strives to model Christ through his presence.
- **...develops a style that is engaging and evocative, “drawing out” of the learners, and not just “putting in.”** The catechist is sensitive to where her learners are at, knows how to speak to their imagination, is comfortable with listening, and is skilled at facilitating.
- **...recognizes the integral relationship of catechesis to all aspects of Catholic life and desires to make those connections naturally understood and experienced in the lives of those being catechized.** Catechesis serves the spiritual, liturgical, social and moral dimensions of the person. The catechist puts faith in dialogue with the home, the parish and its liturgies, the playground, the neighborhood, the workplace and, indeed, the entire world.
- **...fosters comfortableness with and an affinity for “sacred mystery,”** The catechist seeks to offer an alternative to a relativized worldview by revealing a “sense of the sacred” to the people of a culture where God has been marginalized and religion has been trivialized.
- **...prays well *with* the catechized.** The catechist does not just teach about prayer, but offers rich and intimate experience of prayer that opens them to the Scriptures, symbols, rituals and liturgical expression of our ancient and universal Church.

Though this list is not exhaustive, it can certainly seem exhausting. It is appropriate to share some further thoughts on being an “effective” catechist, in hopes of more completely filling out the picture of the catechist’s role and making the role seem not quite so daunting.

First of all, these qualities form an **ideal** of what a catechist can be. It is an extremely rare individual who excels in all areas mentioned. Certainly no one begins his or her ministry as an ideal catechist. It takes time to grow into the role and develop a style that works best for you. See the aforementioned traits as a sign of hope, affirming what may already be your strengths, and as a source of support and direction, offering possible areas for continuing development. Those around you in ministry may be of great help to you in discerning both. Don’t be afraid to ask for feedback.

Often catechists put too much pressure on themselves. After you’ve prepared and prayed for your upcoming session, try to relax and enjoy your time with your group. Yes, it is a precious time you have with them, but it can be a joyful, fun experience. To help make this possible, it is essential that you **not** be a perfectionist in your role. That will only generate frustration. Be yourself! Remember and appreciate that it is **YOU** that God has called to this role, in this time with this group. More than your “expertise,” it is your humanity that they will value and learn from. Don’t be afraid to share (appropriately, of course) some of who you are. Be honest with them when you don’t know something. Being a catechist doesn’t mean having to be a walking Catholic encyclopedia. You can always find the answers for the next time you are together.

In terms of classroom management and issues of discipline (particularly with children and adolescents), here are three strong pieces of advice. **First, be clear in the setting, and consistent in the application of behavioral expectations.** You will be well rewarded for the effort you invest in this. And children, despite what they may say, will appreciate the clear boundaries you set. (Some catechists find that having the children invested in establishing the boundaries proves very helpful.) **Second, immediately establish a relationship of respect.** While many catechists naturally want to be liked by those in their group, this is much more likely to happen over time if students have respect for you first. And, of course, respect ought to be modeled and taught as the prevailing attitude among the children and youth, as well. Good catechesis is nearly impossible in an environment where this is lacking. **Third, be realistic, but don’t be afraid to ask a lot from your learners.** More often than not, it seems we get what we ask for. And by having high expectations, in general, you are sending the right message that catechesis is an important, not peripheral, endeavor and deserves our best effort.

As for the catechetical lesson plan, it is obvious that preparation is vital. There is no substitute for it and it is your best hope for successfully covering the material of that day. Yet, a good catechist does not have an overly rigid grip on the session, so as to remove all possibility of the influence and guidance of the Holy Spirit. It happens not infrequently that the best part of a session comes from a development that was **not** in the lesson plan. For the catechist who has command of the material, and knows the difference between genuine discussion and time wasting, there can be an openness and freedom to ride a wave of sincere and

Fostering Faith Catechist Formation Insert

meaningful faith exploration. Truly, the best catechetical experience is when the Holy Spirit is allowed to be the real catechist in your midst. And it is the effective catechist who is able to welcome and navigate that grace-filled presence.

Finally, an exhortation for ministering in a collaborative and connected manner. Utilize the wisdom of your catechetical leader, share your talents and creative ideas with other catechists (and be open to theirs), and find ways to involve the parish (inviting in guests, publicizing your happenings, reaching out to those in need, etc.). And most importantly, explore ways to involve the whole family in the parish catechetical process. In particular, when working with children, it is essential to find ways to make parents “co-catechists.” Encourage parents, the children’s primary influence in all things, to be supportive and engaged in the catechetical effort, so that it extends far beyond the time of the weekly session. When the family is sharing in catechesis together in their homelife, we have reason to be confident that the seeds of faith we are nurturing will come to yield a rich harvest.

CONCLUSION

As catechists we recognize the call of our baptism to serve, participating in the ancient task of echoing our Roman Catholic faith. Catechesis is a ministry of sharing the revelation of a loving and saving God with those in our midst. With confidence in the abundant grace of the Holy Spirit, let us joyfully strive to bring the “good news” of Jesus Christ to those we encounter. How fortunate we are to be bearers of the very best news this world has ever known!

REFLECTION/DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

In order to complete this study and earn one hour of credit toward catechist certification, you must respond to the reflection/discussion questions in either of the following ways:

1. Write/type your responses (20-40 words each) and submit them to your catechetical leader;
2. Engage in a formal discussion of the questions (at least 30 minutes) in some forum approved by your catechetical leader; e.g. a catechist meeting, level meetings, team meetings, catechist pairings, etc.

Review Questions

1. Name and describe the primary catechetical device Jesus used when speaking to crowds.
2. What does it mean to say Jesus “embodied” the Gospel? What does *Gospel* mean?
3. What do the documents of the Church point to as the core of Catholic catechesis?
4. List some of the values of the early Church from its process of catechizing and initiating members. What was that process called?

Practical Applications/Critical Thinking

1. Describe why you think Jesus was an effective catechist. Which quality in Jesus’ catechetical style would have made him most effective in catechizing you?...in catechizing the people of your parish today?
2. What are the similarities and differences between the prevailing approach to catechesis prior to the Second Vatican Council and today?
3. Why can we call St. Paul and Mother Teresa catechists? What qualities did they have in common? What were some differences?
4. Recall a primary role model of faith for you. What did you learn from that person? How did she teach you? Which qualities of his would you like to make part of your catechetical style?
5. Choose 3 traits of an effective catechist that are among your strengths. Describe for each how you have demonstrated (or might demonstrate) each in your role as catechist.
6. Choose 3 traits you would like to develop more effectively within your ministry. Describe how you can apply each as a catechist.

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