

Fostering Faith Catechist Formation Insert

Church: 1 hour



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

CHURCH: Theology of Church

THEME

Ecclesiology, that part of theology which studies the nature, members, structure, and mission of the Church.

CATECHIST COMPETENCIES

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

1. Articulate how biblical images, models, and current reflections help us to explore and appreciate the mystery of the church.
2. Provide examples of how these biblical images, models and current reflections relate to their own lives and concerns.
3. Explore the Church as a “community of communities.”
4. Describe the function of the teaching office of the Church in catechesis.

CATECHISM REFERENCES

#748-975

FOCUSING THE STUDY

The Church shares with Israel, God’s ancient people, a calling as God’s chosen people in the world. A number of biblical images, theological models and reflections assist us in reflecting on the mystery of the Church. Leadership in the Church exists to serve the whole of the Mystical Body.

INTRODUCTION

What is the Church? What does it mean to be Church? Most early childhood catechists have experienced the delight of pre-school children as they recite the words and perform the hand actions of “Here’s My Church.” A contemporary version of the activity goes like this:

*Here’s my church, Here’s the steeple, Open the doors, See all the people!
Close the doors, And hear them pray. Open the doors, They come out singing!*



While the Church is a mystery whose depths can never be fully understood, this hints at some basic elements for a theology of the Church. The Church is:

- a visible public building (the visible Body of Christ on earth)
- comprised of people called by God who have come together (community)
- to affirm Jesus Christ as Lord in word and sacramental life (particularly Eucharist)
- who depart singing (strengthened by the Spirit for mission or service in the world).

childhood word-action play

NAMES AND IMAGES OF THE CHURCH

The word “Church” (Latin *ecclesia*, from the Greek *ek-ka-lein*, to “call out of”) means a convocation or an assembly. The early Church saw itself as an heir to the assembly of the Chosen People before God, particularly for their Mount Sinai assembly where Israel received the Law and became God’s people.

Today, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, points out that the word “church” has three inseparable meanings:

- liturgical assembly
- the local community
- the whole universal community of believers.

“‘The Church’ is the People that God gathers in the whole world. She exists in local communities and is made real as a liturgical, above all a Eucharistic, assembly. She draws her life from the word and the Body of Christ and so herself becomes Christ’s Body.” (CCC #752)

BIBLICAL IMAGES OF CHURCH

Biblical images can give us some insights into the nature and mission of the Church. These images assist us in delving more deeply into the mystery of Church. These Biblical images have been used in such recent church documents as *The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (Lumen Gentium – Light of all Nations, 1964)* of the Second Vatican Council; *Sharing the Light of Faith, 1979*; the *Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1994*, and the *General Directory for Catechesis, 1997*. Following are some of the biblical images that you may wish to reflect upon in your study of the Church:

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- The Church is a *sheepfold* whose one and necessary door is Christ (Jn 10:1-10).
- The Church is a *flock* of which God Himself foretold that He would be the Shepherd (cf. Is. 40:11; Ez 34:11 ff.).
- The Church is led and nourished by Christ himself, the *Good Shepherd* and the *Prince of Shepherds* (cf. Jn 10:11; 1 Pet. 5:4), who gave His life for the sheep (cf. Jn 10:11-15).
- The Church is the *vineyard* cultivated by God. Christ says, "I am the true vine, you are the branches... apart from me you can do nothing." (John 15:1ff.).
- The Church is a tract of *land* to be cultivated, the field of God (1 Cor 3:9).
- The church is the *edifice, building* of God (1 Cor 3:9) with Christ as the cornerstone (Mt 21:42; Acts 4:11; 1 Pet 2:7). On the foundation the Church is built by the apostles (cf. 1 Cor 3:11) and is known by various names: *the household of God* (1 Tim 3:15) ... built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets with Jesus as the capstone. (Eph 2:19-22); *God's dwelling* with the human race (Rev 21:3).
- The Church is *our Mother* (Gal 4:26).
- The Church is a community of believers, *a people of his own*, the People of God. (1 Pt 2:9).
- The Church is *one Body in Christ* (Rom 12:5). *Christ is the head* (Col 1:18).
- The Church seeks to *serve* all peoples (Mt 20:28).
- The Church is the *Bride of Christ* (Jn 3:29) and Christ is its loving *bridegroom* (Mt 9:15; Eph 5:26ff).
- The Church is the *Temple of the living God* (2 Cor 6:16).
- The Church is in *exile*, journeying on earth as in a foreign land (2 Cor 5:6; Col 3:1-4).



All of these rich images serve as powerful metaphors for us to understand the reality of the Church, a mystery that we can never fully grasp.

MODELS/IMAGES OF THE CHURCH

In simple terms a "model" or "image" or "description" is a way to look at or perceive the Church. Models or images attempt to convey the total meaning of the Church and taken together they form a "lovely tapestry" (Fr. Al McBride) or a "kaleidoscope" (James Frazier) that touches our total self and enriches our relationship with the Church.

The Church as a mystery

"The Church is a mystery. It is a reality imbued with the hidden presence of God." (Pope Paul VI, Sept. 19, 1963) "...prefigured in creation, prepared for in the Old Covenant, founded by the words and actions of Jesus Christ, fulfilled by his redeeming cross and his Resurrection, the Church has been manifested as the mystery of salvation by the outpouring of the Holy Spirit." (CCC #778)

The Church as sacrament

The church as sacrament sees church as the "...visible, tangible shape of a present, but invisible spiritual reality – namely the presence and activity of Jesus and His Spirit in the hearts of people." The spiritual reality of the church is expressed in appropriate organizational, ritual and legal forms which are "...meant to reveal, protect, and deepen the shared spiritual experience." (Cardinal Avery Dulles, S.J.) The Church is "...a sign and instrument...of communion with God and of unity among all men." (CCC #752)

The Church as People of God

God willed to make all holy and save them, "...not as individuals without any bond or link between them, but rather to make them into a people who might acknowledge him and serve him in holiness...he called together a race made up of Jews and Gentiles which would be one, not according to the flesh, but in the Spirit." (CCC #781; 1 Pet 2:10)

The Church as One Body in Christ

"Believers who respond to God's word and become members of Christ's Body, become intimately united with him...There is only one Spirit who, according to his own richness and the needs of the ministries, gives his different gifts for the welfare of the Church." Christ is the head of the body, the Church. (CCC #790-792)

The Church as Pilgrim

As a community existing in space and time, the pilgrim church moves toward complete union with God. The church is "one, holy, catholic and apostolic." The church is *one* in the Lord, as seen in its belief, worship and commitment to Christ's word and authority. The church is *holy* because of its union with Jesus. The church is *catholic* because it is universal, for all peoples. The church is *apostolic* because it professes the faith of the apostolic church.

The Church as Servant

Jesus saw himself as a servant, serving the needs of the poor, sick, the tormented and fearful, the hungry of body and spirit. God's spirit is at work wherever people work for true human values. "The Church is called to serve all people in discovering and accepting God's kingdom as they work to build a better world." (Cardinal Avery Dulles, S.J.) It was not until the Second Vatican Council that the image of "servant" was applied to the Church as a whole.

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-Cardinal Avery Dulles, S.J.

The Church as Community of Disciples “Disciple” means “learner” and was used in the New Testament to refer to the followers of Jesus. All Christians are “learners,” “beginners” in the Christian life. Every Christian is called to be a disciple in a unique and personal way: “It is the community of the disciples, each of whom in a different way-at times very consciously and consistently, at other times not very consciously and very inconsistently - is following Christ.” (*Pope John Paul II, The Redeemer of Man, #21, 1979*).

The Church as Institution

The church is a visible worldwide structure or organization existing to serve God and proclaim Christ’s presence to a world much in need. Christ’s spirit is expressed through institutional means, eg. structures, schools, hospitals, social service agencies.

The Church as Evangelizer/Herald

“Go into the whole world and proclaim the gospel to every creature.” (*Mark 16:15*) The Church “exists in order to evangelize.” (*Pope Paul VI, Evangelii Nuntiandi, #14, 1975*) “The Church is to tell people over and over the most amazing news of all – that God loves us so much that He actually sent His Son to make possible a life of freedom, peace, mercy, joy, justice, and love by entering fully into everything human and radically crippling the powers of evil” (*Cardinal Avery Dulles, S.J.*).

“...we must see first and foremost Christ saying in a way to each member of the community: ‘Follow me.’”

-*Pope John Paul II, The Redeemer of Man*

COMMUNION OF COMMUNIONS

One can view the Church as a “communion of communions,” a rich variety of associations of Christians: domestic church, parish, diocesan church and universal church. (Morris Pelzel)

The most basic association is that of the *domestic church* – a household composed of parents and children aware of their Christian calling and parents serving as the “first heralds of the faith” to their children. (*LG #11*). Some theologians, no doubt reflecting on the current world, have broadened the meaning of the “domestic church” by writing of *households of faith*, where faith is nurtured and sustained by households of single persons, multiple generations, or of unrelated adults.

The *parish* is a communion of households that usually has other church associations or movements, e.g. catechetical programs, school, renewal groups and parish organizations. Gifts and talents are shared as the community gathers to hear the word of God and celebrate Eucharist. The parish is the most important *locus* in which the larger Christian community is formed and expressed. (*GDC #158*) The Archdiocese of Chicago has a wide diversity of 378 parishes, 12 missions and 14 shrines!

The *diocese* is a communion of parishes with the bishop as the person with primary responsibility for overseeing the unity of the diocese. Francis Cardinal George, O.M.I., is the Archbishop of Chicago and he is assisted by eight auxiliary bishops. Individuals, households, and parishes participate in activities at the diocesan level, e.g. The *Chicago Catechetical Conference, The Fostering Faith Institute* or other diocesan-wide celebrations. Parish communities may also participate in mutual exchanges of gifts that foster a greater degree of community, e.g. Parish Sharing Program.

The *universal Church* may be seen as a communion of dioceses with the Pope, the bishop of Rome, Pope John Paul II, maintaining and preserving the communion of the diverse diocesan (local) churches of the world. The universal Church may be seen as “a Body of Churches.” (*GDC #217*)

TEACHING OFFICE OF THE CHURCH & CATECHESIS

Our ministry of catechesis “...must be carried out under the guidance of the magisterium of the Church, whose duty it is to safeguard the truth of the divine message, and to watch that the ministry of the word uses appropriate forms of speaking, and prudently considers the help which theological research and human sciences can give.” (*GCD, #38, 1971*). The Pope and with him the bishops offer teachings that guide and direct the whole Church. Leadership in the Church exists to serve the Church. Bishops preach the Good News, act as pastoral leaders, guide the Church and oversee catechesis. While “Catechesis is a responsibility of the entire Christian community,” (*GDC #220*) certain Christians have specific responsibilities. The diocesan bishop has primary responsibility over catechetical programs. In the Archdiocese of Chicago, Cardinal Francis George, O.M.I. is assisted in this task by his auxiliary bishops and an archdiocesan *Office for Catechesis*. Under the bishop, the pastor holds catechetical responsibility in the local church (*GDC #222*). The *General Directory for Catechesis* points out that quality catechetical programs depend very largely on the presence and activity of the pastor. Under the supervision of the pastor, many parishes have seen women and men assume positions as

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Catechetical Leaders, usually with the title of *Director of Religious Education* (DRE). Indeed, it is the policy of the Archdiocese of Chicago that each parish have an approved Director of Religious Education or share one with one or more parishes.

Catechists, responding to a personal call of Jesus Christ and having received the mission to catechize from the Church, mediate and facilitate "...communication between the people and the mystery of God, between subjects amongst themselves, as well as with the community" (*GDC #156*).

"Thus the Church's mission is not an addition to that of Christ and the Holy Spirit, but is its sacrament: in her whole being and in all her members, the Church is sent to announce, bear witness, make present, and spread the mystery of the communion of the Holy Trinity."

-CCC #738

CONCLUSION

This session has very simply introduced the topic of *ecclesiology*, the study of the church. Moving Biblical images and helpful theological models can give us some insights into the nature and mission of the mystery of the Church. The Church as "communion of communions" – *domestic church, parish, diocesan church, universal church* - can also assist us in our understanding, appreciation and love of the Church. The teaching office of the Church ensures the proclamation of the complete truth to all believers and the world. While all Catholics have a responsibility for catechesis in the Church, certain Christians are called to specific responsibilities.

REVIEW/DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

In order to complete this study and earn one hour of credit toward catechist certification, you must respond to the review/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. What does the word "Church" mean?
2. List and describe six (6) biblical images of the Church.
3. What is a "model" of the Church? List and describe four (4) models of the church.
4. Describe the following: "domestic church," "parish," "diocesan church," and "universal church."
5. What is the relationship between catechesis and the teaching office of the Church?
6. Who is responsible for catechesis in the local church?

Practical Applications/Critical Thinking

1. What two (2) Biblical images speak most to you of your understanding of the Church?
2. How would you present one of these biblical images of Church to a young group of children or to an adult group?
3. What two (2) "models" of Church speak most to you of your understanding of Church?
4. How does your parish reflect the Biblical images and models of church discussed?
5. What implications do you think one of these "models" would have on catechesis (e.g. church as sacrament, servant or community of disciples)?
6. How can you more fully contribute to the life of the domestic church, the parish, the diocesan Church and the universal church?

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