

# Principles of Whole Community Catechesis

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### Part 1. Meeting Christ in Catechesis

Every week, year in and year out, we parish directors and volunteer catechists sit down with our small classes of children or adults, regardless the age we teach, and try to pass on to them some of the Catholic Faith that we love so much. It happens all across the Church. Sunday mornings or Wednesday evenings, or sometimes both. It's a great and wonderful ministry - the ministry of catechesis.

Most of us use a textbook from a major publishing house. The titles all suggest the importance of the ministry we share: *Call to Faith, Faith and Life, Faith First, We Believe, Blest Are We, Christ Jesus the Way, This is Our Faith, Christ Our Life*. The lessons in these texts are a solid way for us to present what our bishops have asked us to: a full and complete treatment of the faith in every grade level. We're more than happy to do it.

But here's a little test. In order for a child or an adult to grow in faith from the catechesis we provide, what must be present in that child's or adult's heart *first*?

The *General Directory for Catechesis* (GDC), our guide in this ministry, gives us a clear answer. And what must be present first, important as it is, cannot be found in any of those textbooks.

What's missing, the GDC tells us, is *conversion to Jesus Christ*. Conversion precedes catechesis. And conversion is often not part of what we all do.

Oh, yes, we talk about Christ in our classes, and pray in our prayer corners, and try to help our students understand how Christ is in the Church. But knowing *about* Christ and actually *meeting* Christ are two very different things, according to the GDC.

Conversion to Christ *precedes* catechesis. And once experienced, it's conversion that leads a person to undertake his or her journey of faith, not facts or knowledge about Catholicism - which is mainly what the textbooks provide. A person who has not yet really met Jesus Christ and decided to follow Christ, can sit in a classroom and study religion, but until there is conversion, that person won't be a dedicated follower of Christ.

This just makes good common sense. You could study about Islam, for example. You could know the prophets, the scriptures, the prayers, and the people - but that wouldn't make you a Muslim, would it? You could explore Judaism - it's history and liturgies and leaders - but that would not make you a Jew. So it is with us. Even if you know all about the Church and Christ, if you do not give your heart to Christ, you are not a Christian, except nominally.

One of the difficulties (recognized by the *General Directory*) in our present method of providing religious education is that so few of those in our catechesis programs have experienced this conversion. As a result, their hearts are often not in the program! But even more difficult, many of us - the catechists - also have not experienced this conversion! We might agree to teach 4<sup>th</sup> grade this year, for example, but we're not always in it with our whole hearts. Like the kids, we may even dread the weekly classes a little. But as article 142 of the GDC puts it:

*...there cannot be teachers of the faith other than those who are convinced and faithful disciples of Christ and his Church.*

Here's what else the GDC says about it. There's a strong message contained in this:

*Many who present themselves for catechesis truly require genuine conversion. Because of this, the Church usually desires that the first stage in the catechetical process be dedicated to ensuring conversion... Only by starting with conversion... can catechesis, strictly speaking, fulfill its proper task... (GDC, article 62)*

**Baptism is no guarantee.** Unfortunately, baptism is no guarantee of conversion. For some, the faith begins with great vigor, but they lose heart after a while. For others, their faith was never deep - always on the surface of their lives until something better or more interesting came along. And for still others, perhaps many others, baptism was just not taken very seriously to begin with! Or they were baptized as an infant, but raised in a home where faith is not part of everyday life. Consequently, these have never come to know Jesus in their own lives.

Jesus spoke of faith like this in the Gospel. The writers of the *GDC* saw in this the seeds for everything they wrote about the renewal of catechesis in our day and age:

*A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seed fell on the path, and the birds came and ate it up. Other seed fell on rocky ground, where it did not have much soil, and it sprang up quickly, since it had no depth of soil. And when the sun rose, it was scorched; and since it had no root, it withered away. Other seed fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked it, and it yielded no grain. Other seed fell into good soil and brought forth grain, growing up and increasing and yielding thirty and sixty and a hundredfold. Let anyone with ears to hear listen! (Mark 4:3-8, NRSV)*

And here's the rub. Because the seed of faith is vulnerable to the changing soil of one's life (to borrow Jesus' metaphor a moment) the church must take great care to provide

on-going opportunities for conversion, followed by effective catechesis to nourish faith and help it blossom.

It's these opportunities for conversion that we want to explore here for a moment.

**Conversion, anyone?** What is the best way to lead someone else to follow the Way of Christ? How do you help others experience lasting Christian conversion? How do you help *yourself* remain in a process of turning your own heart to Christ over and over again?

Placing learners in a classroom setting will not be enough in itself. One can use this setting to pass on the facts of the faith, or to help a learner know *about* the Bible, or *about* Christ. But to lead others to actually meet Christ, and be converted to follow the Way of Christ, requires more.

How does this sort of conversion happen? Well, the most profound way that we can help others is to provide opportunities for **faith sharing** within our programs, and throughout our parishes. This is the bedrock, the very first step, in helping others come to experience Christ personally in their own lives.

The Catechumenate, in its wisdom, knows this instinctively, which is why everyone who comes into the Catechumenate is first invited to "break open the Word" in a group setting. It's in those moments of **faith sharing**, of opening one's heart, that little by little, each can turn to Christ. The renewal programs of the church, beyond the Catechumenate, also know this: TEC, Marriage Encounter, Cursillo, and all the others. During these retreats, it's in the **faith sharing** done within the group that folks find themselves turning their hearts to Christ.

So it must be in our catechesis programs. Each and every time we gather, every single week, we should begin by creating the environment in which **faith sharing** is possible. It's not difficult to lead. It can be done throughout the whole community. And it will change the spirit of your program in such a positive way that you'll soon wonder how you ever lived without it! [For a full guide to doing this, including examples and handouts, see the material in *Whole Community Catechesis in Plain English* (Twenty-Third Publications).]

In the process of **faith sharing**, each person looks into the events and people of his or her life - and sees them anew as part of his or her faith. One then begins to see (slowly at first) that one must *die* to oneself in order to *rise* with happiness, and then *go forth* to love as a follower of Christ. Conversion of this sort is on-going throughout life: conversion moment followed by conversion moment. *Poco y poco*. Little by little. Over and over again.

This is how we bring the Paschal Mystery of Christ into our classrooms. We invite people to share about how, in their own everyday lives, they experience dying and rising. We invite them to share about how they sense a call to reach out to others in love and faith. In that sharing, Christ is found.

Once we have shared our faith this way, the sacraments start to make sense. We come to understand how we must die in Christ through baptism and reconciliation. We find within ourselves a profound desire for communion with Christ and our mates. We experience healing and peace. And we experience the same excitement that those first apostles must have felt as we go forth now, confirmed in the faith, eager to tell others the good news!

**For Christ's sake!** All of this is done for Christ's sake, not our own. It is Christ who acts within us when we *open* ourselves to the mystery of faith. The opening is the key. As we share, we become more open. We experience a turning of our hearts, a conversion to Christ. And this is what *precedes* catechesis. In other words, only when one has truly met Christ like this, and allowed oneself to enter into Christ's death and resurrection, can one begin to understand one's faith. Only then does religious education make any sense to him or her.

Try this. As everyone is getting settled, and in place of any other opening prayer, re-read part of the Gospel from the previous Sunday Assembly. Then invite each one in the room to share something from their past week that connects in some way to the teaching of Jesus in the Gospel. You can help them do that by posing a well-prepared question that leads them to see the Gospel in the context of their own lives. Join in this by sharing yourself, honestly and in plain words, about your own experiences.

## Part 2. Whole Community Catechesis

Everyone wants to have an extensive, working, popular adult education program in his or her parish. On budgets limited by the amount of money spent in schools and children's programs, we develop course after course for adults. But people seem not to care. We feel frustrated, most of the time. And finally, we tell ourselves that even a few people attending is better than none. Adults, we tell ourselves and each other, just won't come to our programs. Why not? Is their faith too weak? Are the offerings poor? Has everyone got too many other priorities? Doesn't anyone care?

The *General Directory for Catechesis* has made it clear that adult formation is the norm of all catechesis. It's job number one. The GDC is blunt about that: "Adult catechesis must be given priority" (article #258).

So why isn't it working? And what can we do to make it work better?

The main it isn't working, believe it or not, is the framework within which we provide for *children's* programs. It's the American school house framework. It has some strengths for delivering facts about religion, but it has some serious problems when it comes to transformation, life long learning, and the participation of the whole community.

In this school house framework, it's mainly children who are enrolled in an optional program of religious education which follows the school year in schedules, formats, and holidays. In many places the children or their families pay tuition for this program. They meet in classrooms. In fact, in places where there is no Catholic school, parishes often prepare makeshift classroom spaces to resemble those in a school. The children are called students and their leaders are called, often, teachers. The term "CCD teacher" is still common, despite efforts to change it to "catechist." The students use textbooks which resemble school house textbooks and the teaching method is mainly to present what is found in those textbooks. Parents are noticeably absent, just as in general curriculum schooling. The work is done by parish catechists.

Most importantly, after about eighth grade or so, or after receiving the sacrament of confirmation, the students believe that they have graduated from religious education. This sense of being graduated or finished is very strong. As a result, most post-confirmation or post-middle school religious education programs are mainly youth activity programs of one kind or another. Adult education is mainly left undone because most adults in the church believe they have graduated from religious education which is, after all, for kids.

Nearly every adult in the church believes that he or she has completed his or her catechesis. They're done for life like they are with grammar school. Why go back to that?

Unless we change the framework within which we provide children's programs, we will never change the thinking of adults about catechesis as a life-long journey of faith, to borrow an appropriate phrase from the Catechumenate. But if we do change this framework for the kids, then adults will come pouring into catechesis again.

The answer, I think, is in whole community catechesis, under whatever form you implement it. People like Jane Regan of Boston College, John Roberto of the Center for Ministry Development, and Françoise Darcy-Berube are leading the way. Many diocesan and parish leaders of religious education programs are moving in this direction on their own. Whole community catechesis is a real movement, springing from the heart of the GDC.

The name, whole community catechesis or total parish catechesis or faith formation for all, (It doesn't matter what you call it.) is drawn from article #254 of the GDC where it says that

*The Christian community is the origin, locus, and goal of catechesis. Proclamation of the Gospel always begins with the Christian community and invites [people] to conversion and the following of Christ. It is the same community that welcomes those who wish to know the Lord better and permeate themselves with a new life. The Christian community accompanies catechumens and those being catechized, and with maternal solicitude makes them participate in her own experience of the faith and incorporates them into herself.*

What does it look like?

### **Plank #1: A link to the whole community and the Sunday Assembly**

The first plank of this new framework is that in whole community catechesis, the total parish is involved in learning and sharing about the faith. Every Christian of every age in the parish is involved, not just children. The Sunday Assembly at Mass is the font from which all this flows. It's the font from which the whole community draws the sweet water of faith-sharing and self-understanding as the Body of Christ and the People of God.

Whole community catechesis provides a framework within which such parish wide faith-sharing happens every single week, year in and year out. "How will you get people to actually do this?" you ask. The beauty of whole community catechesis is that it is made simple. It's in plain English. And it's delivered in small, bite-sized chunks. People will do it because it is sweet for them, because it fulfills a desire they have for the spiritual life, because it is designed to fit naturally into their everyday lives.

### **Plank #2: Christian households of faith and the parish as resource center**

The second plank of this new framework is that the households of the parish become the main focus of re-developed parish programs. The household is where faith is lived every day. So, in whole community catechesis, there is a strong focus on developing households. Christian home-making becomes very important. The household - along with the meals shared there - is the context in which whatever we teach in religious education class becomes the stuff of real, everyday living.

### **Plank #3: A constitutive part of Christian life**

The third plank in the framework of whole community catechesis also involves a change from the present way of thinking. Whole community catechesis is not an *optional* parish program for which one enrolls and pays tuition to participate. Catholics don't

“enroll” for the Sunday Assembly at Mass or “pay tuition” to participate there. Whole community catechesis starts with the premise that faith formation or learning about the faith is part and parcel of being Christian. It isn’t optional. It’s central, like being in the Sunday Assembly at Mass.

The slightly more complex term we use to describe this is *constitutive*. Catechesis or growing in one’s faith is constitutive, we would say, of the Christian life. One simply cannot say that he or she is a Christian unless he or she is also in a process of sharing faith. Sharing one’s faith is catechesis. And sharing faith, or catechesis, is what makes a Christian a Christian.

#### **Plank #4: A movement within God’s people and the vision of the leaders**

The fourth plank of whole community catechesis is that it is more like a *movement* within the parish than a *program*. In a sense, the church itself is really a movement more than it is a “membership organization.” It’s a movement of the Spirit of Jesus to the world. It’s a movement within our own hearts. Faith is constantly growing and changing. It’s constantly in movement. To become a Christian, in short, is to join a *movement*, not a club. It’s an unending process of announcing the Good News and assisting folks to live by it.

So, too, with whole community catechesis. It is a renewal movement toward faith-sharing and instruction in the faith. This faith-sharing and instruction is unending and everywhere present in our lives.

As such, working within the framework of whole community catechesis serves to tie together (1) all the formal instruction which the parish provides (homilies, children’s instructional programs, sacramental preparation, leadership training, preparation for various pastoral care and liturgical ministries, biblical study and spiritual growth opportunities) with (2) the informal sharing of faith which whole community catechesis implants into everything else, especially everyday household and parish life.

The single factor which makes renewal movements (such as TEC, Search, Marriage or Engaged Encounter, Cursillo, RENEW, AA, Al Anon, and others) work is that the people involved in these movements *share their faith together*. This gives them a feeling of movement, from one person to another, from one community to another. It’s the Spirit moving people where she wills.

#### **In Sum: Adult Christians of Mature Faith**

Cullen Schippe, the former publisher at Benziger, has summed this up for everyone. In whole community catechesis, he says, the new goal or outcome is “adult Christians of mature faith,” following the Way of Christ, sharing supper and Eucharist, working hard

for justice and peace, and turning their hearts to Christ over and over again, throughout their lives. It's an entirely new framework within which the faith is shared and passed from one generation to the next. New wine, new wine skins.

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