



CATECHETICAL LEADER



CATECHIST AS WITNESS

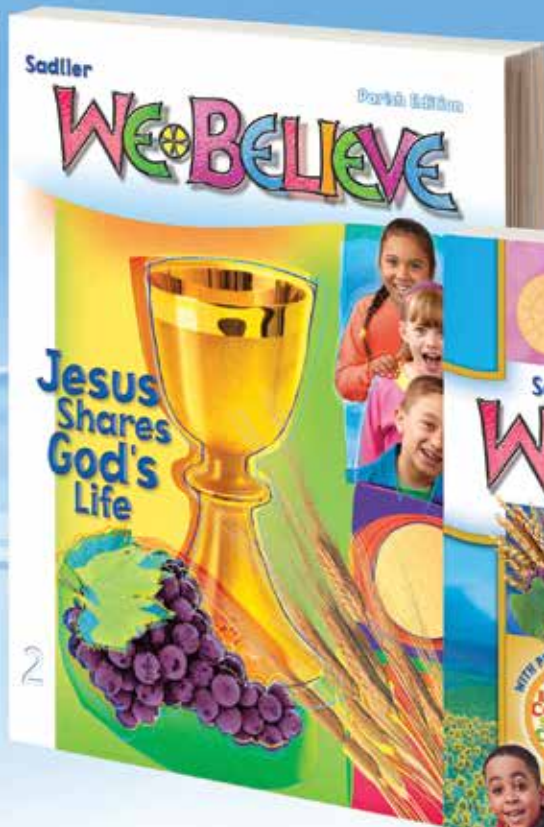
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"I Am a Catechist"

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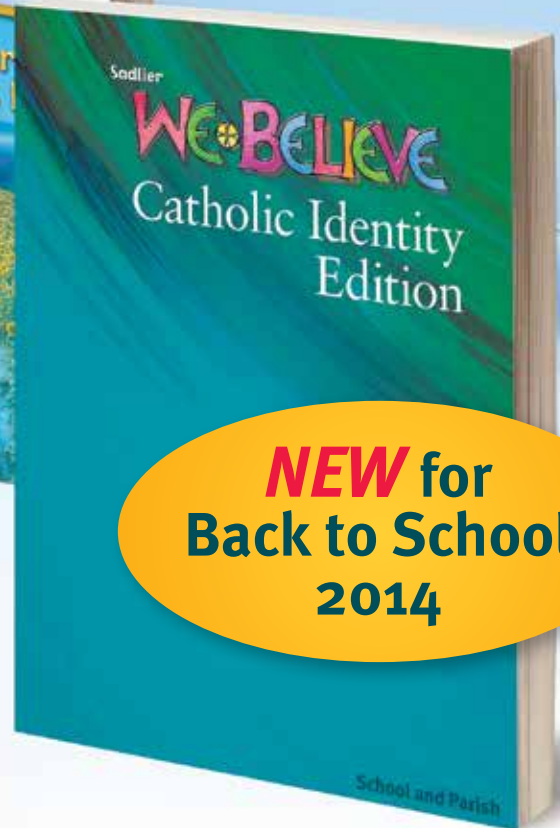
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DEDICATE...AGAIN

Bill Miller



National Conference For Catechetical Leadership

As a person who likes to write, I often find myself referring to my trusty *Webster's New World College Dictionary* in order to ascertain the origin of a word or the various ways it can be used properly.

As I prepared to write this article, I was searching my mind and heart for a theme and came up with the word "dedicate."

That idea led me to the dictionary, where I found the following words written as the first entry under definitions for the word dedicate: "to...devote to a sacred purpose." The Lord speaks in marvelous and mysterious ways, sometimes even within the pages of a dictionary! Allow me to elaborate.

In his marvelous book on spirituality, *Four Steps to Spiritual Freedom*, Thomas Ryan, CSP, titles Step Four: Daily Rededicate Your Life to God. This advice has changed my life for the better. Every morning, (almost without fail) I recite my very own prayer of rededication to the Lord. Without a doubt, this is one of the most important things that I do on any given day. This simple prayer reminds me that I am once again dedicating my day, the series of days that make up my life, as well as my very being to the One who gave me life...the One who loves me eternally, immeasurably, and unconditionally. Rededicating your life can be a wonderful opportunity to refocus on how you are serving the Lord.

Today, I write to challenge each one of us to consider rededicating ourselves to the sacred purpose of promoting quality catechesis in every way possible. What does your life, particularly as you live it each day, say about your commitment to help build the reign of God now and for all eternity?

Our ecclesiology affirms that we manifest the concept of church at various levels: locally (as a parish), regionally (as a diocese), and internationally (as the church universal). As leaders in the ministry of catechesis, so too are we called to catechize at all levels, by working together, no matter what our particular catechetical setting. One way to strengthen the global concept of church is to be an active member of NCCL. Together as members of

NCCL, our mission is to serve the ministry of catechesis at every level. As members of this great national catechetical organization, we serve in parishes and dioceses all over the world, including the Archdiocese for the Military Services.

One of the best ways to become more active in NCCL is to volunteer to serve on a committee. We have more than one dozen committees in place, each with specific responsibilities, to assist our members in proclaiming the Good News. The list includes: Adult Faith Formation, Evangelization, Rural Catechesis, Intercultural, Membership, Development, Technology, By-Laws and Policy Review, Annual Conference Planning, Practical and Theoretical Foundations, Product Development, Standards and Certification, Communications, and the Editorial Committee. Mission statements and a list of current committee members for each committee can be found at our website, ncl.org, under the category "Conference Committees."

Not long ago, I was listening to someone recount a conversation with one of our members who said, "I have gifts to share and would like to be part of an NCCL committee, but no one has ever asked me to serve." As of today, no current member can ever make that claim again. Right here, right now, I am asking you to serve the Lord in this way, by becoming an active committee member. I am available to help you learn more about the work of the various committees. You can contact me at the e-mail address listed at the bottom of this page. I will answer your questions or direct you to someone who can answer them. That is my pledge to you.

Together we are NCCL! As such, we are disciples in the catechetical vineyard. We have gifts that can be used locally, regionally, and universally in order to build God's reign here and now. This is our time to be part of God's work in a special way. Prayerfully search your heart, and listen to our Lord who guides you. ■

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HAPPY LENT

Leland Nagel



I can remember the first time I heard that innocuous phrase...Happy Lent! How could I be happy about giving up something I loved? Little did I understand the power of love and the willingness to sacrifice for love, nor did I have any real appreciation of what Lent really meant.

I am older now and *Happy Lent* has become a part of my greeting as the season of penitence begins. While we speak of Lent as a time of surrender and renewing our baptismal commitment, we cannot seem to abandon the penitential sense associated with fasting and abstinence.

I understand the importance of repentance, regret, and remorse, especially when it is associated with someone you love. Sorrow and atonement for having hurt someone are real actions of contrition. These are reasons we engage in reconciliation and the sacrament of penance; however, the joy and happiness that occurs because of this healing belies the negativity often associated with the sinner, with the one estranged from God. “Happy Lent” is not a welcome greeting to an unwilling, sacrificial lamb.

Sacrifice is a word often associated with pain and suffering in order to achieve a worthy goal. Athletes have to sacrifice their bodies to achieve success for winning. Musicians, dancers, and singers have to sacrifice recreation in order to practice their art for optimal performance. Sacrifice demands discipline and even some pain but if the sacrifice stems from love, it doesn't feel like a sacrifice. Virtuous sacrifice is rooted in love. I have been told by many mothers that the pain of childbirth diminishes with each day of the life and love of their child(ren).

The internet and YouTube are full of stories and videos of people who sacrificed hours and hours to create a flash mob to bring joy to others, of men who planned elaborate events to propose marriage including one guy who planned the entire wedding from his girlfriend's Facebook page. Most of these people would dismiss the idea that they sacrificed. Instead, they speak of how they wanted to show this person the extent of their love for her/him.

That is exactly what makes Lent happy. We are so in love with Jesus that we want to spend more time with him in prayer. We want to learn more about Jesus and about his message, a message of joy, one affirmed in the very title of Pope Francis' Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium*, *The Joy of the Gospel*. What can be happier than to spend time with the one who calls you his beloved? Lent is happy because we choose to spend time in prayer.

There is no comparison between the pain of physical hunger and the pain associated with the deep, inner hunger for holiness. The God-shaped hole cannot be ignored. In our longing for faithfulness, we must fast from success and abstain from things other than God. Yes, physical fasting and abstaining can lead to a healthier body which in turn, can serve as the impetus to surrender to the Beloved and to allow the God-shaped hole to be filled with love, the love of God.

*Bathed in God's love and awash
in God's grace, we go forth
to give witness in our very lives.*

Bathed in God's love and awash in God's grace, we go forth to give witness in our very lives. As Pope Francis writes in *Evangelii Gaudium*, “For if we have received the love which restores meaning to our lives, how can we fail to share that love with others?” (8) Almsgiving is more than sharing money; it is “a

work of justice pleasing to God” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2462). “Each must do as already determined, without sadness or compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver” (2 Cor 9:7).

Happy Lent doesn't mean you will be dancing the jig for 40 days, nor does it mean you will be telling jokes 24 hours a day. I doubt if anyone could sing “I've got that joy, joy, joy, joy, down in my heart...” with the same enthusiasm on Holy Thursday as they did on Ash Wednesday if they were singing during every waking hour.

Joy does come from love and consequently, “an evangelizer must never look like someone who has just come back from a funeral” (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 10). May your Lent deepen your relationship with Jesus. May all of your sacrifices stem from a desire to love him more dearly and follow him more nearly so that day by day you will have a happy Lent. ■

To Know the Place for the First Time

Eileen C. Burke-Sullivan



Nearly seven years ago I flew home to Wyoming to celebrate the funeral liturgies for my 90-year-old father with my brothers and sisters. His death came, as death nearly always comes for the living, at a most inconvenient time; it was a time of great grace.

It is the custom in my family to pray the vigil liturgy for the deceased in the church. Then, after the evening vigil liturgy, family and friends remained with the body in turn through the night, before Mass the next day. I signed up for a time during the early hours before dawn. The church was the parish prayer home for most of my childhood. It was the site of my first Communion, where I played the organ and sang in the choir for Sunday after Sunday for many years, where the bishop confirmed me, and where my husband and I professed our wedding vows. It was deeply quiet that May night, but the old steam pipes banged occasionally reminding me of the lateness of spring warmth in Wyoming. When the main door opened as others came to keep vigil, it seemed very loud in the pre-dawn silence.

As I sat next to my dad's body — at this point of ending — I remembered an event from my childhood that was about my beginning. It was a memory of a spring day in April when I turned five years old. I was accompanying Dad to one of the sheep camps to watch him work with the newborn lambs and their mother ewes. While riding along, he told me the story of my baptism.

A GIFT TO THE CHURCH

Just days after I was born, before returning to the ranch some distance from town, Dad took me, with my aunt and uncle as proxy godparents, to the local Catholic church. My mother was still at the hospital since in those days mothers did not participate in the child's baptism. At the parish, the Irish pastor quickly baptized me according to the rite of the day. But at the end of the ceremony, without a word, he reached over to my aunt and took me in his arms and strode over beneath the statue of the Blessed Mother. There, he placed me on the altar and dedicated me to Mary and to service of the church. Dad was both too startled, and too polite to protest he told me, but he shared with me many years later, he was clearly surprised and a bit uncomfortable. As Fr. McDevitt's prayer ended and

they left the church, Dad asked him whether this was a new rite or prayer of the church. "Oh, no," Father responded, "I just had a thought that as your fifth child little Eileen would be a great gift to the church from you and Mary."

I have never heard anyone else tell of such a thing at their baptism, but perhaps for some deeply pious priests such offerings did not seem alien to the similar offering that young women often made those years with roses given to the Blessed Mother at their Catholic weddings. Since I heard the story as a small child, I often begged Dad to tell it to me again. My mother laughed one time when I told her about it, and she assured me that she had heard it from both Aunt Mary and Dad. She hastened to assure me that I did not need to worry about it — I was still free to choose my own life direction when I became an adult.

INVITATION TO REFLECT ON INITIATION SACRAMENTS

I tell this personal story by way of entry into a reflection on the sacraments of initiation. I propose to juxtapose two texts with some visual images and invite you to think about and remember some of your own experience with life and death, fire and water, oil and food and drink — and above all, with experiences of giving yourself away in love. All this is meant to invite you to consider the initiation sacraments, if not in new ways, at least with renewed appreciation.

The first text is drawn from a long poem by T.S. Eliot, titled "Little Gidding" which is section four of the *Four Quartets*, a work that Eliot considered his masterpiece. It demonstrates his wrestling with time, life journey, and ultimate meaning. This section of the poem begins with the words: "With the drawing of the Love and the voice of this Calling we shall not cease from exploration." And Eliot ended the section and the whole poem with the words: "And the Fire and the Rose are one." In the few lines of wonderful images, Eliot weaves time and memory; the call toward eternity and the completion of the human journey into God — which began in the water (river) and culminates in the fire (Spirit) driven union of humanity and divinity. So much more evocative than explanatory words allow, the reader needs to turn to the poem itself as the basis for this reflection — before going further. (Go to this link to read the poem: tinyurl.com/LittleGidding.)



Photos by Eileen C. Burke-Sullivan

Most semesters I teach an undergraduate course entitled “The Church and Sacraments.” In this course, I ask them to probe the meaning of material phenomena they frequently encounter and to engage the things through memory and imagination. I ask them, for instance, what their experience of fire is: How have they encountered fire? What does it mean to them?

On another day, I ask them what part roses play in their lives or their memories. Or on yet another day I will ask what experience they have with water. Do they drink it? Do they swim? Have they been to the ocean and seen the tides come in and go out? Have they been to Niagara Falls and seen the enormous power of water? Have they known the absence of water, been thirsty, or endured the experience of drought on a farm? Have they ever been in a rain storm that flooded their home or streets? The students have many things to share — often disjointed recollections of important experiences — which they have never really reflected upon, and certainly not connected to their formal religious experiences. It is a startling discovery for them to find that human beings for years have had similar experiences and have identified them with life itself, to God, and to grace.

THREE MOVEMENTS

Initiation in the Catholic Tradition is celebrated in three movements that are echoed in the movements of the funeral

rites at the end of the Christian life in this world. The Rites of Initiation establish a matrix of identification of who we are and how we are to be human. What begins in baptism, we discover through our liturgical prayer, comes to completion at the funeral because there we are gathered (Eliot uses the term “infolded”) into the complete union that initiation made possible, guided, and nourished. The movements of initiation are not separate, although they are discreet liturgical celebrations; they do not stop something and start something else. The movements repeat, echo, open out onto, deepen, enrich... think of all the dynamic terms for “infolding” — something folding in to the next, always there but never fully experienced, understood, or depleted.

So the watery tomb and womb, the pouring out of Spirit and then entrance into divine participation are all in all — but the movements focus our attention, our hope, and our realization upon one and another as we celebrate over and over the mysteries of faith (sacraments).

The dying, birth, cleansing, life-giving of the water bath, the sealing, healing, confirming outpouring of oil, the entrance into the intoxicating reality of Christ’s life, death, and new life through the blood of grape transformed into wine by human hands and transformed into the life force, the blood, of the body of Christ by the Father’s Will, Jesus’ obedience, and the Spirit’s action on our joint offering of Jesus in union with his



church, in the ultimate self-donation of grateful love. How to grasp this, how to hold it, how to capture its meaning, and more importantly the authentic human living, that flows from and returns to the celebrations.

DRINKING FROM THE CUP

The second text is a familiar passage from the Gospel of Mark. The story is told slightly differently in the other synoptic accounts, but Mark's is probably the oldest witness-tradition of this event.

James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came to him and said to him, "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you." He replied, "What do you wish me to do for you?" "Grant that in your glory we may sit one at your right and the other at your left." Jesus said to them, "You do not know what you are asking. Can you drink the cup that I drink or be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?" They said to him, "We can." Jesus said to them, "The cup that I drink, you will drink, and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will

be baptized; but to sit at my right or at my left is not mine to give, it is for those for whom it has been prepared. (Mk 10:35-39)

At his question, they assert confidently that they can drink his cup and be baptized with his baptism. But they clearly do not know what they are saying. The expression "drinking from the cup" evokes striking references and images of both joyful celebration and deep suffering from the consequences of sin in the Old Testament. This earlier account hints that Jesus was certainly thinking of both implications when he commanded his followers to take and drink the cup of his blood. The blood of the body of Christ is both the blood of Jesus and of all those he has joined to himself through the Holy Spirit. To drink the blood of Christ is to drink at the well of salvation, where the sin of the world is drunk to the dregs in order to destroy it. In a very particular way, engaging in the participation of the Eucharist through the cup carries a slightly different, and perhaps more frightening, message for the community of Jesus' followers. We are called to consume the sin of the world into our bodies (as he did) in order to participate with Jesus in forgiving it and

ending its consequences in the world. Not just for our own sins do we drink the cup, but for all the sins of humanity, and by this we agree to be agents of forgiveness by taking those consequences into our own flesh and enduring them in compassion with all who suffer them.

In baptism we become like Isaac, Abraham's son. We are sacrificed by our parents, by the faith community, in union with the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. We carry the wood for the holocaust of our own life, just as Isaac and Jesus did, and we agree to die — especially to the sinful impulses of the broken human condition — to the lures of power, glory, wealth, control, and absolute independence. We allow our false hopes to be burned in the flames of the Easter candle and enter the watery tomb/womb of the church with Christ who walked this path ahead of us and calls us to join him in total self-donation and new creation.

Like Isaac, our human lives are spared in the sacrifice — at least for now — but they belong not to our parents, not even to the community, they belong exclusively to Christ. From now until natural death, I belong to no one — not even myself — as I belong to Christ because I have been sacrificed into the death and resurrection of Jesus. Clearly to enter baptism is to be born into a new creation — a creation of God's reign — and it demands of us a human response that is different from those who have never known, or are not transfigured into his Body. We die to the impulse of self-will that is the

inheritance of sin, and rise to real human life as God intended it to be and as Jesus lived it.

Dead, buried, and risen (born into a new creation), and totally forgiven of all sins, I am brought by the local community to the Bishop who seals the deal — who confirms the action of my family, of friends, or local assembly of believers. The Bishop binds me to the whole church living now and across the centuries of faith, to Mary and the apostles and all the disciples, to the saints, and sinners of our story. The river of my baptism now choked with brambles and reeds and rocks of ordinary life becomes the way of Christian life. In the act of confirming, the church seals me to the work of Christ to announce the Good News of salvation to others; to witness to the glory of God's merciful love.

TASKS OF THE REIGN OF GOD

In the face of the cost of such witness, I receive the courage to live and die by the will of God — for I am in the flesh of God the Son — through the power of the Holy Spirit. Like Paul, I have been called to put on the mind of Christ — to think and act for the purposes of God's reign. To heal the sick, to counsel the weary and broken hearted, to seek the lost and bring them home, to let the little children come and be fed with the bread of life, to make peace among those who are warring, and to bring truth and light to those who dwell in the darkness of ignorance. These are but a few of the tasks of the reign of God — but central to all tasks is that



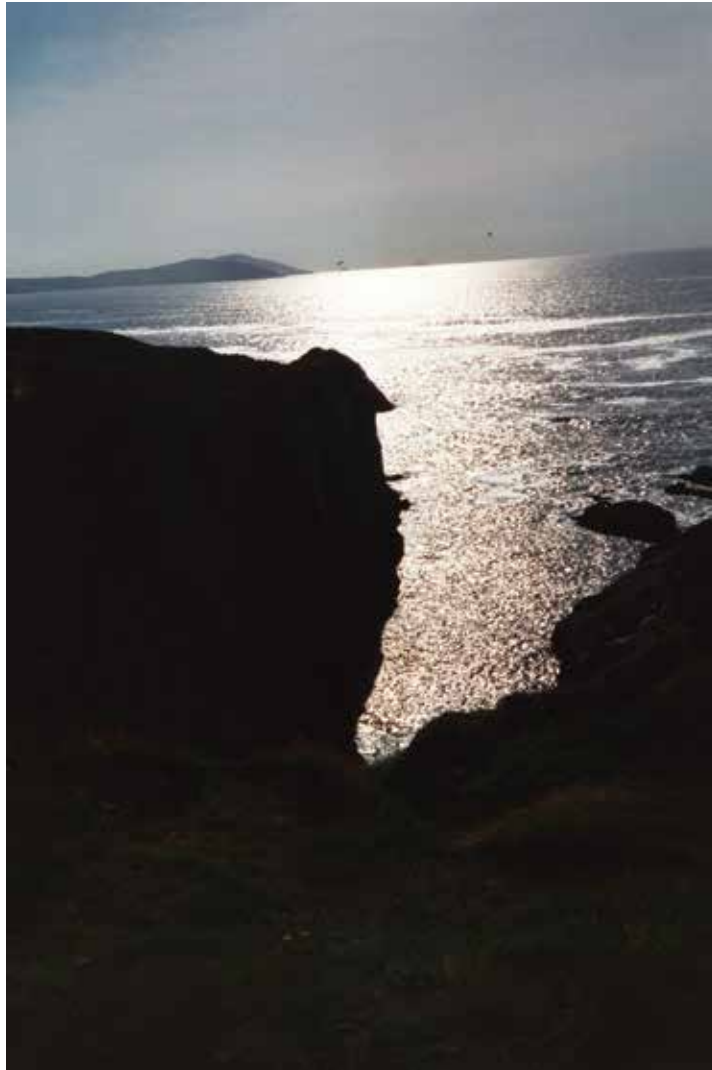
of forgiving and bringing reconciliation to those who are divided.

Such work on behalf of God's reign confronts the violence of the world and often brings it to bear in our own lives. St. Ignatius counseled his followers to expect persecution, loss of one's good name undeservedly, physical suffering, and possibly even death from such witness. It is no accident that the first saints of the church were the martyrs: the witnesses of mercy, of justice, of the name of Jesus. In any time or place where evil seeks to have power, the Reign of God will be perceived as a usurper, as a threat to be destroyed.

Pope Francis has spoken often in the last few months about being a church of and for the poor. Many of us have perhaps forgotten that during the Vatican Council 50 years ago, nearly 700 bishops of the world, including many US bishops, signed a mutual agreement to be visibly a poor church at the service of the poor. Many bishops returned home and sold their elegant residences and took up simpler living in smaller houses, apartments, or parish rectories. In this way, they challenged priests and laity alike, to consider living "simpler lifestyles." Perhaps in this Jubilee time of remembrance of the Council, we can be renewed in that vision recognizing that it is foundational to any renewed evangelization.

What nourishes us on this road of witness, of *martyrium*, is the bread of life and cup of salvation. When I tell the students that confirmation is not so much about them claiming their own baptismal life as it is the diocesan church confirming the local priest's act of baptism, sealing the neophyte in the life and mission of Jesus, they ask, "Well when do we get any say in this? If we were baptized as infants how do we take hold of and claim the sacrifice?"

The answer, of course, is that we claim our baptism and affirm the sacrifice every single time we come to the eucharistic assembly. There we hand over the gift of our daily life and all that it



means in terms of work, play, and relationships. In the form of ordinary bread and wine that comes from the assembly, we offer this gift of ourselves and claim our baptismal life. Jesus did not lightly ask his disciples, nor does he lightly ask us, if we can drink the cup that he would drink. To consume the Bread of Life and take the Cup of Salvation is to enter the victory of Christ by becoming one with Him as the victim — the victim who gave himself so that all might have life. Moreover, every time we act through the grace of God to show forth the Reign of God, we claim and enact our baptism and the church's seal. So we do claim the gifts of initiation over and over. As we do so through the years of our lives, our initiation graces transform us and prepare us to pass through physical death and be fully united in the new creation that the funeral liturgy pre-

supposes: "*May the angels lead you into paradise, may the martyrs come to welcome you and take you to the holy city, the new and eternal Jerusalem.*"

To end this short reflection, I invite you to meditate for a bit on the gift of being transformed into Christ — "infolded" into the love of God the Father through the Power of the Spirit. The hymn *Ubi Caritas* is an ancient Latin chant that is translated: Where charity and love are found, God is there . . .

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time
(“Little Gidding,” T.S. Eliot) |

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Effective Witness Formation: Developing Catechists for the New Evangelization

Jared Dees



One of the most frequently used words during the Year of Faith, besides “new evangelization,” was the descriptive title “witness.” In the context of catechesis, it is a word that is best described by Pope Paul VI in his letter on evangelization. “Modern man listens more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if he does listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses” (*Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 41).

This challenge is just as relevant today as it was when these words were written. For sustainable evangelization and catechesis in our culture, we need more witnesses, yet our catechetical formation approaches tend to be structured toward developing teachers more than witnesses. As we continue to work toward a new evangelization, it is crucial that we continually reevaluate our approach to forming catechists and teachers.

This should not come as a surprise, but for the most part children do not like school. Just the day before I wrote this, I had a second grade girl in my CCD class tell me how school was so boring (to which I immediately felt self-conscious about the school-like activities I had planned for the day). With such a strong emphasis on external motivators like test scores, grades, and college acceptance rate, it is difficult to inspire intrinsic motivation in schools. Yet, intrinsic motivation is required for effective evangelization and catechesis.

At the same time, if we look to our exemplary models of faith over the years, we find that there have been more saints who were witnesses than those who were teachers. The word martyr means witness. The martyrs who sacrificed their lives for God, were called witnesses. People listened to them and remember them because of the sacrifice they made with their lives more than the lessons they taught with their words or writings. Even those who were not killed on account of their faith gave up their entire lives to follow Jesus and lived what they taught.

SIGNS OF EFFECTIVE TEACHER FORMATION

If our goal is to develop catechists who are effective teachers, we might observe some of the following in a successful teacher formation program:

- * Children quietly work at their desks.

- * Children participate in class discussions.
- * Children clearly understand instructions and work diligently on task.
- * Children score well on tests and quizzes.
- * Children can articulate doctrines of the faith accurately.

All of these things are desirable outcomes. In fact, I’ve spent most of my teaching career in pursuit of strategies and resources that will create these kinds of student behaviors. The truth is, however, these outcomes are just not enough to make a long-term impact on individual’s faith lives. We are called to do more than just teach children to know *about* God, we must teach them to *know* God.

Pope Francis, when writing about the creed, articulated this point clearly in his encyclical *Lumen Fidei*:

“The creed does not only involve giving one’s assent to a body of abstract truths; rather, when it is recited the whole of life is drawn into a journey towards full communion with the living God. We can say that in the creed believers are invited to enter into the mystery which they profess and to be transformed by it.” (*Lumen Fidei*, 45)

If, therefore, we do more than pass on a body of abstract truths and instead invite children on a journey towards communion, what should the results of our catechist formation be instead?

SIGNS OF EFFECTIVE WITNESS FORMATION

In a classroom led by a witness, we might observe the following:

- * Children quietly (or vocally) focused in prayer.
- * Class discussions that include personal stories and the experience of God.
- * Children consider what they are learning to be relevant to their lives.
- * Children can articulate, but more importantly profess, a belief in the lessons they have learned about faith.
- * Catechists who share their faith and failures willingly and appropriately.

Essentially, classes led by witnesses lead children on a path to be what John Paul II hoped we would all become: “not only in touch but in communion, in intimacy, with Jesus Christ”

(*Catechesi Tradendae*, 5). This requires a different set of skills than teachers are typically asked to develop and it calls for a different approach to their formation.

EFFECTIVE WITNESS FORMATION: GOALS AND APPROACHES

So how do we develop formation opportunities that inspire catechists to be witnesses more than teachers? First, it requires different intentions and different goals. If we are going to form true witnesses, we have to focus more on developing the whole person than training them in teaching skills. Consider developing religious educators into witnesses using the formation approaches below.

Goal: Witnesses recognize their work as a calling.

If God has called us to become catechists, then he has also called us with a purpose. Every vocation is developed with our unique interests and skills in mind. The same goes for the call to be a catechist. Whether it is a particular interest in the sacraments or in a devotional prayer like the Rosary or even a love of music, we are all pulled towards certain aspects of the Christian faith that we know, love, and can't help but share.

Formation approach: Catechists can get in touch with their unique calling to the classroom by making a list of all the aspects of their own faith lives or faith formation that interest them the most. What aspects of their faith are they excited to share? What have been the most profound lessons in their own faith formation? They might also make a list of the things that they see missing in the faith lives of the children and parents they teach or the biggest challenges they see facing the church today. With this list in mind, they can make a commitment to sharing this passion and calling with the students that they teach.

Goal: Witnesses have an intimate relationship with Christ.

Let's look briefly at the meaning of the words teacher and witness. *Teacher* implies sharing lessons and ideas objectively. *Witness* implies sharing a personal experience, something that has been seen. For Christians, that personal experience is always an encounter with Christ. As witnesses, catechists do more than share lessons; they share their own experience and relationship with Christ.

Formation approach: Help catechists get in touch with their relationships with Christ by giving them time to remember how that relationship began and developed over time. What were the key moments and stories that relate to their faith journey? Who were the people that helped them come to know Jesus? How do they continue to encounter God (through prayer, Scripture, sacraments, family, etc.)?

Remembering these encounters is an important exercise for all of us to do. It helps us recommit ourselves to Christ because we are able to remember all the great things he has done for

us. Remembering those encounters is an essential first step in being able to share these experiences with others.

Goal: Witnesses have a habitual prayer life.

Witnesses maintain an intimate relationship with Christ by constantly and habitually developing that relationship through prayer. There is an important distinction between praying when one feels like it and praying at dedicated times and places each day. Just as relationships develop over time through conversations and shared experiences, so does our relationship with God. The more we can spend time with God in prayer, realizing his love for us, the more we will feel compelled to share that love with others.

Formation approach: Directly ask catechists about their prayer life. If they feel they could do more, give them some suggestions for what you do or what others do. You might suggest that they dedicate daily time to reading the Bible, praying the Rosary, or reading a devotional or spiritual book.

If they don't already have a daily prayer practice help them select a specific time each day and carve out a few minutes at that time to spend in prayer. Check in with them periodically throughout the year to see how their prayer lives are doing. If this feels uncomfortable for you to do this as a catechetical leader, good. You are a witness too, and one of the best ways you can be a witness is to share your prayer life and the challenges you have experienced in developing one.

Goal: Witnesses are able to share their personal stories.

As Catholics, we don't share our personal testimony or spiritual conversion stories enough. We are all called, as St. Francis of Assisi once said, to "preach the gospel always, but sometimes use words." Unfortunately, too many of us use this quote as an excuse to never use words at all.

Witnesses share their faith. It isn't awkward or pushy; it is just real stories and real life experiences that have helped them grow and overcome challenges in their lives. In the classroom, witnesses present more than the content of the faith; they share their own life experiences and how they have been able to integrate the doctrines of the faith into their own lives.

Formation approach: Give catechists the opportunity to prepare and share a short testimony either to fellow catechists or to their students. Encourage them to think of one moment when an encounter with God changed them in some way. Assure them that it does not have to be a life-changing event from their past. It can simply be an experience in prayer, at Mass, or in conversation with a family or friend that led them along a new path toward the Lord.

Goal: Witnesses live and share their faith outside of the classroom.

What does Pope Francis have to say about the vocation of a catechist?



Photo by Moyan Brenn

“Being a catechist means witnessing to the faith, being consistent in our personal life. This is not easy! We help, we lead others to Jesus with our words and our lives, with our witness. I like to recall what Saint Francis of Assisi used to say to his friars: ‘Preach the Gospel at all times; if necessary, use words.’ Words come... but witness comes first: people should see the Gospel, read the Gospel, in our lives” (Address to Catechists on the Occasion of the Year of Faith, September 27, 2013).

Not only do witnesses share their personal faith experiences in the classroom, they share it with family, friends, and acquaintances in their everyday lives as well. Being a witness is not just about teaching in a classroom, it is about living a different life.

This was Pope Francis’s advice to catechists at the close of the Year of Faith. But before we go calling our friends and pouring out our Christian testimonies, look closely at the Holy Father’s words. Before the words, come the actions. We live our faith first and then the Spirit will give us the opportunities to share our faith with words.

Witnesses live their faith. They let their light shine before others so that they see good deeds and glorify God in heaven (Mt 5:16). When people see that light shining, they will ask for help when they need it. Thankfully, witnesses have the courage to meet them in their pain and bring with them God’s mercy.

Formation approach: When communicating with catechists, share the Holy Father’s advice with them. Challenge them to see their vocation as catechists as something that extends beyond the classroom and beyond their students. In particular, challenge them to develop relationships with the parents of their students so that they can see how their faith as catechists overflows into their everyday lives.

Spend some time getting to know your catechists. When you see them at parish events, develop a relationship with them that extends beyond the catechetical leader-catechist relationship. If they are not at these parish events, be sure to invite them. The more you get to know them and show them how

your faith is influencing or has influenced your life, the more likely they are to show others their faith with their personal life.

Goal: Witnesses support other witnesses in a common mission.

The Lord Jesus appointed 72 disciples whom he sent ahead of him in pairs to every town and place he intended to visit (Lk 10:1). Jesus sent his disciples out in pairs because discipleship is not meant to be lived out alone. In order to serve God, we need partners to help us. Being a catechist can be a lonely endeavor. Whether they have classroom aides or not, standing in front of a room full of kids and planning weekly lessons is not something they often get to share with others.

Formation approach: In order to sustain their role as witnesses, they need continuous support from their catechetical leaders and their colleagues. It is vitally important that you provide your catechists with opportunities to share stories, challenges, successes, and ideas that have worked best for them. Whether you do this digitally or with in-person meetings, do not overlook the importance of building a community of disciples.

If I had to select one virtue that separates witnesses from teachers, it would be the virtue so clearly exhibited by the martyrs and witnesses who gave up their lives for their faith: courage. Witnesses have courage. It takes courage to live out your faith beyond the classroom and even more courage to humbly ask others for help along the way. If we can instill this virtue of courage and help lead our religious educators to be more focused on developing the confidence they need to be witnesses more than teachers, we will be able to develop a much more vibrant church for the middle of the 21st century. ■

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Pope Francis: “I am a Catechist”

Patricia E. Clement



In September, 1,600 catechetical leaders from 51 countries gathered in Rome for the first of four International Congresses on Catechesis. There have been global catechetical gatherings in the past, (Pope John Paul II hosted one in 2004) but this was the first with Pope Francis, and the first to be sponsored by the recently created Pontifical Council for the Promotion of the New Evangelization.

Archbishop Rino Fisichella, President of this new Pontifical Council, has been charged with the implementation of the Catechism in the context of evangelization. His opening remarks at the Congress made it clear that he intends to champion the cause of catechetical excellence: “Let us abandon our obsolete stances, and be open to a new model of transmission and communication of faith... The time has come for our bishops in our cathedrals to give catechesis, just as Pope Francis does!”

The Congress for professional catechists was held over a three-day period and was followed by a free, two-day pilgrimage for all who serve in catechetical ministry. The theme was “Catechist - Witness of Faith,” and highlighted the first section of the Catechism. Archbishop Fisichella intends to host three more Catechetical Congresses, each themed around a section of the Catechism. The next event (TBA) will explore sacraments and liturgy.

The two highlights of the event were Pope Francis’ address to the catechetical leaders on Friday, and the Pilgrimage Liturgy on Sunday in St. Peter’s Square with more than 100,000 catechists in attendance. During the Holy Father’s visit on Friday, he spent over 20 minutes strolling down the center aisle of the Paul VI Audience Hall greeting the conference attendees. The full text of his address can be found on the Vatican website.

These are a few things he said:

“We need good catechists! Thank you for your service to the church.”

“Keep this in mind: I didn’t say to do the “work” of catechists, but to “be” catechists, because this is something that embraces our whole life. It means leading people to encounter Christ by our words and our lives, by giving witness.”

BELOW: POPE FRANCIS GREETES THE CONGRESS CATECHETICAL LEADERS; CATECHETICAL LEADERS FROM NIGERIA



“Even if at times it may be difficult and require a great deal of work, and although the results are not always what we hope for, teaching the faith is something beautiful! It is perhaps the best legacy we can pass on!”

“The heart of a catechist always beats with this systolic and diastolic movement: union with Christ — encounter with others... The catechist is conscious



COUNTERCLOCKWISE, FROM LEFT: CATECHETICAL LEADERS FROM PUERTO RICO; PAT CLEMENT ARRANGED WITH HER DIOCESAN PAPER TO SECURE A VATICAN PRESS PASS WITH ACCESS TO THE COLONNADE ROOFTOP FOR PHOTOS; CATECHETICAL LEADERS FROM COSTA RICA; SATURDAY MASS FOR CONGRESS PARTICIPANTS IN ST. PETER'S BASILICA; 100,000 CATECHIST PILGRIMS GATHERED FOR THE CLOSING MASS IN ST. PETER'S SQUARE



of having received the gift of faith, and he or she then gives that gift in turn to others...It is pure gift: a gift received and a gift given. The catechist is right there, at the center of this exchange of gifts."

"I am a catechist too!"

The first Congress was such a huge success that there is no doubt that future gatherings will grow exponentially. "It was like World

Youth Day for grownups!" exclaimed one enthusiastic participant. The low conference fees, excellent hospitality, and affordable housing options had everyone making plans to return.. █

Patricia E. Clement has served in parish leadership for over 25 years. She is currently the Director of Religious Education for St. Ann Parish in Colonial Heights, Virginia. She attended the International Congress with Jeanne Branch, another NCCL member and Parish Catechetical Leader from the Richmond Diocese.

Marriage and Holy Orders: Sacraments of Witness for the Modern World

Greg Erlandson



Just last month I celebrated my 30th wedding anniversary, and I was struck by the genuine enthusiasm of people when they heard we were celebrating that milestone. Waitresses even gave us free desserts!

Around the same time, a dear friend of mine, Fr. Ron, celebrated his 50th anniversary as a Capuchin priest. The church was packed with well-wishers, friends, and family, some flying thousands of miles to be there.

These celebrations are communal affirmations of commitments that are withstanding the tests of time. But there is also something strangely unmodern about them, as if such longevity was an accident, or a freak occurrence.

What is it about modernity that makes us doubt that relationships will last except by chance?

LONGEVITY IS RELATIVE

Longevity, we know, is relative. In the United States, if a building hits 100, it's old. In Rome, I lived in an apartment building in Trastevere that had been built 500 years ago. That was *sort of* old.

For human beings, longevity is relative too. People in the time of Lincoln were considered getting up there in years when they lived to be 45. Nowadays, we see Willard Scott daily congratulating new centenarians. Today turning 100 is only *sort of* amazing.

Longevity has another meaning entirely when we look at technology, which now dominates our attention and our imaginations. Take the cell phone: The technology is only a few decades old, yet it has remade our world to an extent we still barely comprehend. By the end of the year there will be more cell phones than people on the planet. There are already one billion smart phones.

But remember that most amazing cell phone of all, the first iPhone? Only six years old and Apple just announced that that first edition is now officially obsolete.

Technology has become a series of replaceable events, and technology is the metaphor of our age. It isn't just software or

machines that are so easily replaceable. Ours is now a world where we are supposed to change careers three, four, or five times in our working life. Businesses assume that everyone is replaceable, and Alvin Toffler's prediction in *Future Shock* that marriage for life would be replaced by serial monogamy takes this to its logical conclusion. In a famous advice column some years ago, Ann Landers cut to the chase when she said the question that someone contemplating divorce should ask is: "Are you better off with or without your spouse?" All of this makes up a culture of dispose, replace, move on.

ARE WE COMMITMENT-PHOBES?

We desire longevity, but we live in the age of the disposable and transitory. We desire the commitment that longevity implies, but everything in our world tells us that such commitment is a bad deal. We have become so commitment-phobic we bridle at being obligated to sign a two-year contract for a new cell phone.

And how can we commit to anything when the world is doubling its knowledge every 15 years? This means every 15 years we have 100 percent more new: New apps, new devices, new technologies, new discoveries, new careers that didn't even exist 15 years ago. How is it possible to commit, to persevere, to keep using something so yesterday as we rush toward tomorrow?

This is the world we — our families, our parishioners, our catechists, our priests, our children — inhabit. This is modernity.

SACRAMENTS OUT OF SYNC?

All of which brings us to marriage and holy orders. I am calling them "sacraments of witness for the modern world." On the face of it, I might just as well call them sacraments out of sync with the modern world.

Why out of sync? Because these sacraments are about community, commitment, and longevity.

At first blush, linking matrimony and holy orders is not necessarily obvious. One is the domain of the laity, in which the sacrament itself, at least in the Latin Rite, is really performed by the two spouses in the presence of God. The second seems — at least in our age — to be defined as the opposite of marriage: No spouse and no sex. Even when people defend the Roman tradition of an unmarried priesthood, they often

contrast it to marriage: No wives and no children so the priest can give his undivided attention to his people and his parish.

But the public and other-directed nature of marriage and holy orders does tie them together intimately. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* pairs these sacraments by observing that they are the only ones clearly “directed toward the salvation of others. If they contribute as well to personal salvation, it is through service to others that they do so” (1534).

A priest friend describes it more simply as a case of little church, big church. Each family is a little church, a little community in which the married couple is dedicated in service to each other and children. It is here they sacrifice; it is here they educate and are educated in sacrificial love. And the priest, as pastor of his parish, brings these little churches together into the larger community. It is here that he lives his life of service and it is here that he is educated in sacrificial love.

Both are efficacious signs of commitment in a world that distrusts and disbelieves that such commitment is possible. In both, faithfulness and commitment to others are modeled. And both are where we encounter the love that surpasses all understanding. It is here where we experience the bountiful mercy of God. “Since God created him man and woman, their mutual love becomes an image of the absolute and unfailing love with which God loves man,”(CCC, 1604).

UNBREAKABLE LOVE

We believe God’s love is so constant that the promise God made to the Jewish people remains unbreakable, even as we present ourselves as the beneficiaries of a new covenant, sealed with the redemptive death of his son, Jesus Christ, who exemplified sacrificial love by laying down his life for us all.

For both Jew and Christian the Psalmist sings,

“The Lord is with me to the end.

Lord, your love endures forever.

Never forsake the work of your hands” (Ps 138).

The family is where we first learn what Psalm 138 describes. It is in the family and in the church where we witness this faithfulness, this enduring heart.

Matrimony and holy orders are sacraments of service, directed to the salvation of others. And in this way they model God’s relationship with us. When we think of them as sacraments of witness, we affirm the fact that they are inherently communal and other oriented. In a fragmented, me-directed world, this witness is fundamentally, profoundly evangelistic.

Yet all around us we see evidence that these sacraments are out of sync with modern experience.

MARRIAGE IS ON THE DECLINE

Marriage and divorce statistics are increasingly muddled by cohabitation numbers, but here is what CARA has reported: 72 percent of all adult Catholics have been married at least once, and 23 percent of all adult Catholics have gone through a divorce. These numbers mirror national statistics. Census numbers tell us that 41 percent of all children are born to unmarried mothers. An estimated seven and one-half million couples now cohabit, double the rate of the 1990s. Sacramental marriages and civil marriages are declining. Divorce statistics are declining too because fewer people are getting married in the first place.

Fifty-three percent of adult Catholics are currently married, but only two-thirds of those were married in the church. What’s interesting is that slightly fewer baby boomers were married in the church than post-boomers.

And while we are talking about baby boomers, guess who is divorcing at an ever-increasing pace: In 1990, fewer than ten percent of people over 50 were getting divorced. Today it is one in four. Twenty-five percent. They call it gray divorce. This is a new phenomenon social scientists are just now studying, but it looks like Americans are increasingly likely to walk away after 20 or 30 or more years invested in a marriage.

THREE DISTRESSING TRENDS

When it comes to the priesthood, the data is less closely monitored, but we have seen three distressing trends in our

lifetime. The first is the number of priests who have simply left: Tens of thousands worldwide since the 1960s. The second is the departure more recently of men touched by scandal, and the third is the erosion of men recently ordained.

Statistics for the latter are hard to come by, but one bishop who was renowned for his scrutiny of would-be vocations, taking only those he considered the very best, had more than a quarter of his priests leave before they had served ten years.

But whether a priest leaves because he fell in love, or fell out of love with God, or abused those entrusted to him, these departures are traumatic in every instance for the Catholic communities they serve.

Likewise, when marriages end and couples divorce, those affected by this collapse are not just the couple. The communal nature of both sacraments means that these falls from grace have a communal impact as well. Divorce and departure are anti-sacraments of witness.

THE VIRAL IMPACT OF DIVORCE

My wife and I have noticed that the impact of divorce is almost viral. When a neighbor, close friend, or sibling divorces, we

Matrimony and holy orders are sacraments of service, directed to the salvation of others. And in this way they model God’s relationship with us.



feel the impact in our own bones. Our marriage hits a rocky patch. Suddenly what seems solid and enduring is unstable, like the earth we confidently stand on until the tectonic plates far beneath us suddenly shift and upend us.

My friend, Fr. Ron, told me that divorce impacts him the same way. He told me how upsetting it is for him as a priest to see couples whose marriages he has witnessed break apart. In every case — when a husband or a wife walks away from their public commitment, when a priest walks away from his public commitment — there is a public wound, a public sense of pain and loss that is rarely talked about.

And this loss ripples outward, its disruption going far beyond simply the priest or the couple. It extends to neighbors, parishioners, and children. It is a striking experience these days to talk to college-age children about commitment. They hunger for it, yet they distrust it. They see marriages implode around them, in pop culture and media, of course, but most importantly, among their friends and family. They are the survivors not just of abortion — where one-third of their generation was never allowed to be born — but of divorce. I knew an 11-year-old girl in a public school in Los Angeles. She was the only child in her classroom with both of her biological parents still married. And her parents divorced a few years later. She is my niece.

It is here where we see the root causes of the explosive growth of cohabitation, a problem that plagues every parish. It is in many instances a defensive response to the instability they see all around them. Their peers and even their parents suggest this is a wise course of action, a test drive, a trial run, a practice lap

for commitment. All of these images are oxymorons that reveal our skepticism that lifelong commitment is possible.

What I find particularly revealing as I see more relationships founder is that society has created a kind of pop culture rite of passage for divorce, but we really don't have much of a language for those who persevere. The couple that falls apart is embraced by sympathetic friends, many of them who have had similar experiences. There is fellowship, and self-discovery, a new sports car, and long talks. There is match.com and endless self-help books.

But what do we do for those who stick it out? How do we acknowledge the couple that overcomes infertility, or infidelity, miscarriages or mismatched marriages, or simply those who quietly become examples of selfless, generative love? Maybe a few minutes at the end of Mass to renew their vows and receive a round of applause when they hit 25 years or 50. That's about it.

I would argue that we don't need to develop more pre-Cana conferences, or public service campaigns extolling marriage between a man and a woman. For both marriage and the priesthood, we need to acknowledge and encourage publicly those who embody these sacraments of witness.

STRATEGIES

What can we do? First, we need to reinforce and strengthen marriages with resources that already exist. There's Marriage Encounter, of course, and Retrouvaille for the hurting ones. We need to promote such programs much more insistently.



Photo by Alpha

Second, we need some creative affirmations of community. A priest recently told me what is happening in his parish: His parishioners pointed out that while the church has lots of activities for children, teens, and newlyweds, and lots of outreach for the sick, dying and the needy, there isn't really anything for the middle-aged person. They came up with an imaginative idea called "Grace uncorked:" a chance for middle-aged people, mainly couples, to gather for wine, hors d'oeuvres, and conversation about faith. I thought this was a creative way to bring people together that is both faith formation and faith affirmation.

Third, what if we found ways to bring older couples together with younger couples? What if couples were challenged to be mentors and encouraged to share their experiences? How could we bring new couples and experienced couples together?

How can we share real stories, stories of heartache and tragedy, and of marriages that have endured all that? We don't have many public models of what psychologists tell us is true: Those who experience hardship and stick it out have better marriages and better lives in the long run than those who quit.

And all of this, while more difficult, is true for priestly witness as well. We start with that remarkable image expressed by Pope Francis last Holy Thursday: The shepherd must have the odor of the sheep about him. Priests need to be men unafraid to be close to those they serve. This means the same honesty and the same openness — with themselves, with their people, and with their fellow priests. This is powerful public witness. This is what fidelity really looks like.

Priestly fraternity is a critical part of this witness: Priests must be close with those who also serve. And this fraternity should stretch across the generations, bridging the gap between young and older that now exists in many presbyterates. This is how holy orders becomes a sacrament of witness.

FIND MODELS OF FIDELITY

Where do I look for inspiration? Where do I see models of fidelity? I see Fr. Ron, a priest who has given everything to his parish, who even in grinding physical pain says Mass for them everyday. I see the sacrificial love of his priesthood. I see my parents, married 43 years until my dad's death. They had eight children, but the second one died suddenly four years into their marriage. The pain of that loss never completely disappeared, but they survived and they modeled the sacrificial love of marriage for their remaining seven children.

In the wedding rings they exchanged in 1952, before they knew all that awaited them, they had inscribed the words "In Christ's Love." It was in them that I first encountered Christ's love.

Thirty years ago, in 1983, my wife and I had the same words inscribed in our rings: "In Christ's Love." This is the power of the sacraments of witness. For it is in the witness and love of others that we are pointed toward the unending love with which God loves us. ■

Greg Erlandson is the president of Our Sunday Visitor.

The Elephant in the Room: Catechetical Leaders Speak about the Sunday Homily

Karla Bellinger



I think that many of us in the parishes were asking those very questions — and answering them — but our voices didn't carry any weight. It's nice that this now is an issue that's being discussed.

The focus group filled the round table during the NCCL conference in May 2013. We were discussing the influence of the Sunday homily on the faith growth of a parish. From this particular group, some responses were positive: “They (the homilies) are usually very upbeat, creative... lively, [giving us] something meaty. ... The better the preaching, the more [those on the margins of faith] want to come back.” Some comments were not so optimistic: “They are dry, irrelevant. The teenagers walk out saying, ‘This is the most horrendous thing I’ve ever heard.’ People have left the parish. [On a scale of 1-10], if I could give it a negative number, I would give it a -2. It generally begins with chastisement. Sometimes there are jokes that are offensive... Just *poor*.”

Then I asked the group of catechetical leaders to talk about pre-homily give-and-take, post-homily feedback, and the discussion that surrounds the Sunday homily.¹ I asked each of the four groups, “What kind of conversation is happening?” One diocesan leader said, “There’s no conversation. It’s the elephant in the room. Everyone knows it’s a big problem, but no one is willing to talk about it.”

What is this elephant in the room? Lay catechetical leaders listen to homilies all the time. They have years and years of collective experience as receivers of Catholic preaching. Many sit in the pew with one foot in the theological world and the other foot in the everyday life of the laity. Thus, they have many thoughts that they could offer to preachers. There is an ache, a longing, a hunger to be heard. Why? Quality Sunday preaching makes a parish’s faith life flourish: it influences catechists, parents, youth, older adults, and all in parish ministry. Yet to date, each has asked the questions of homiletical effectiveness within his or her own head, in parking lots, and/or around the dinner table. Conversation about preaching between pulpit and pew is rare. As the catechetical leader in the opening quote states, “our voices don’t carry any weight.” Now those voices have gathered together. If the homily is an “elephant in the room,” members of NCCL have begun to talk about it.

THE CATECHESIS IN PREACHING RESEARCH INITIATIVE

Why should catechetical leaders take an interest in the Sunday homily at this point in history? Three developments suggest that a change is in the air. First, the USCCB has published a new document on preaching, *Preaching the Mystery of Faith*. That document uses the language of encounter with Jesus Christ as the goal of the Sunday homily within the Eucharistic liturgy.²

Secondly, in his apostolic exhortation *Gaudium Evangelii*, Pope Francis highlights the significance of the homily with “special importance due to its Eucharistic context: it surpasses all forms of catechesis as the supreme moment in the dialogue between God and his people.”³ Francis is also concerned for the homily to be a moment of encounter with Jesus Christ: “The preacher has the wonderful but difficult task of joining loving hearts, the hearts of the Lord and his people.”⁴

Thirdly, the U.S. bishops’ preaching document advocates for a stronger catechetical element to Catholic Sunday preaching. This raises the questions: What is effective catechetical preaching? What does it look like? What does that direction mean for the content and the style of the homily?

Encounter, catechesis, and faith formation in the homily — these are questions that our bishops and teachers of homiletics are currently wrestling with.⁵ Catechetical leaders have much experience here: the tug and pull between formation and information has been the topic of discussion for more than 30 years. Thus, as part of this larger homiletical conversation within the church, the voices of catechetical leaders can be a key source of wisdom at the parish, diocesan, and national levels. At the 2013 conference, Fr. Richard Fragomeni, himself a teacher of homiletics and the keynote speaker, commented to Lee Nagel how very visionary it is of NCCL to sponsor this study.

The remarks that follow are a sampling of the 131 responses of those who participated in focus groups, completed a paper survey at the May 2013 conference, and answered an online survey that was made available to NCCL members in June of 2013.⁶ This is not an official statement or a nationally representative study, but a compilation of voices from the



Photo by James Emery

members of NCCL who responded. What do these catechetical leaders have to say about Sunday preaching?

MANY ELEPHANTS IN THE ROOM

One of the most consistent findings in this study was how very inconsistent are our Catholic homilies. If Sunday preaching is the “elephant in the room,” catechetical leaders describe a wide variety of elephants, from the majestic and the inspiring to the meek and the weak.

A prime indicator of satisfaction is the willingness to recommend a book, a speech, or a product to a friend. When asked if they would recommend the homily that they last heard, almost 41 percent (40.85 percent) of the catechetical leaders surveyed said, “No.”⁷ This data point has significant implications for the “new evangelization” efforts which advise, “Just invite them in.” The hesitation of the church-employed faithful is, “If I invite them in, what are they going to get?” Since Catholics on the margins do not have a heart burning for the Eucharist (or they would be there), the homily is one of the significant elements in the decision for or against the church. One parish DRE described it this way: “The easiest and most obvious way to evangelize the marginalized is Sunday preaching. It is often the first impression of the church. Many judge the universal church based on the local parish.” A diocesan leader said, “Sunday Mass/homilies are an integral moment/opportunity to make positive connections with those who only come to the parish for Mass. They need to be fed well by everyone present, but the homilist has the key source for speaking directly to their spirituality/heart.”

In his opening remarks about the homily in his apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis addresses the significance of the Sunday homily: “... so many concerns have

been expressed about this important ministry and we cannot simply ignore them.”⁸

In some parishes, Sunday preaching resonates with the needs of the people. Elsewhere, it seems deaf to those connections. Why? One diocesan director diagnoses this discrepancy as a listening matter. He says,

I believe the greatest challenge is encouraging homilists to listen to the desires, hopes, thoughts, and challenges of the people in the pews. I have the privilege (and challenge) of being in dozens of parishes each year, and the quality of preaching and liturgical celebration runs the gamut. There are places of hope and inspiration, and some of poor quality, lackluster “celebration,” and faulty theology. One of the distinctions that I observe between those two extremes is that often the parishes with wonderful Sunday experiences are parishes in which the preachers listen to the people.

Preachers, who listen, form listeners who preach. Preachers, who are not listeners, may not form disciples who then go out and preach. Pope Francis puts it similarly: “The homily is the touchstone for judging a pastor’s closeness and ability to communicate to his people.”⁹ The quality of conversation that surrounds the homily impacts its effectiveness. What is the current state of that interchange?

GIVE AND TAKE?

One pastoral associate enjoys a rich interaction with the pastor of her parish who is also her boss. Their staff and pastoral council meetings use the upcoming lectionary readings for prayer and reflection. The homily and the efforts for adult

faith formation are deliberately integrated. Parishioners comment on the quality of the homilies; she often hears, “I felt like Father was talking right to me.” When asked how to actualize the vision of effective preaching, she responds, “Make sure that those who preach are themselves evangelized and understand their part in forming disciples. My role in making that happen is to be in the journey myself and affirm/challenge my pastor on his journey.”

From the responses of the catechetical leaders in this survey, this quality of relationship is a goal toward which they strive. It does not appear to be the norm in practice. About one out of three (35.3 percent) of those catechetical leaders who are employed in a parish¹⁰ had some level of agreement that the Sunday homily is consciously integrated with their adult faith formation efforts. Integration with efforts to form youth in discipleship is lower (29 percent).

Do homilists regularly consult with parishioners to determine their needs for preaching? Only nine percent of parish catechetical leaders could say that happens in any way (8.82 percent somewhat agreed, zero percent strongly agreed); almost 56 percent working in a parish said “no” to that question. The fervent request for parish preaching consulting groups from the 1982 USCCB preaching document *Fulfilled in Your Hearing* has obviously not taken hold in American parish life, even though the few preachers who do incorporate that interaction find that it deeply enriches their preaching.

TABLE ONE

In the last year, out of a possible 52 weeks, how many times have you given this particular homilist constructive feedback about or input into his homily (other than “Good homily, Father...” or “Nice homily, Deacon?”)

0-13 weeks (rarely)	71.4%
14-26 weeks (occasionally)	17.1%
27-39 weeks (frequently)	11.4%
40-52 weeks (regularly)	0%

How about input and feedback between lay leaders and parish homilists? Table one shows how parish leaders relate: Seventy-one percent give feedback or input rarely. None could say that they *always* give feedback. Breaking down that feedback into its component parts reveals interesting trends (table two): When the homily is well done (row one), something is said (an average of four out of five, connoting frequently or always). When the homily is poorly done (row 8), 97 percent of respondents will rarely or never comment. The perception of the homilist’s responsiveness to feedback was also not high (row four), averaging around “occasionally responsive.” Seventy-six percent said that there are few structures in place through which to give input/feedback (table three).

Parishioners share comments with their lay leaders frequently (table two, row two). Those comments are passed on to “Father” less often than they are received (row three). Some in the pew may assume that “because you work in the parish, your job is to set Father straight.” Yet positive comments are more likely to make it through the pipeline than the negative ones. Therefore, lay leaders may shoulder more of their people’s burden from poor preaching than do the preachers themselves, resulting in the heaviness of the “elephant in the room.”

The unevenness of homiletic input/feedback parallels the inconsistency of Catholic homilies.¹¹ On the one hand, transparency from listeners is lacking, even from those in the inner circle of the parish; on the other hand, two studies have shown that Catholic preachers have an unrealistically rosy view of their own preaching: 82 percent consider themselves above average or excellent.¹² It would seem that the two walk hand in hand. What are we to do about that?

WE COULD HELP

Simmering beneath the surface of the words from parish, diocesan, and national catechetical leaders, is a hope to be heard and a hunger to help. Concurrently, there is a sense that help has to be invited from above. An archdiocesan director of catechesis said, “I can’t do much unless invited. If invited, I will dive in — working with seminarians and homilists to help train, coach, and resource.”¹³ A young woman suggests that both the culture of the parish and the formation of catecheti-

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TABLE TWO

Parish catechetical leader responses in percentages; ranked in descending order of occurrence	Never 1	Rarely 2	Occasionally 3	Frequently 4	Always 5	Average Rating
1. When I consider a homily to be well done, I say so.	3	3	15	48.5	30.3	4.0
2. I listen to comments from other parishioners.	9	6	21	45.5	18	3.58
3. I pass parishioners' comments on to the preacher.	6	30	42	15	6	2.85
4. The homilist is responsive to feedback from me and others.	9	33	27	24	6	2.85
5. We discuss the upcoming lectionary readings at staff meetings.	60.6	6	12	9	12	2.06
6. When the homily is theologically inaccurate, I talk to the homilist about it.	48.5	24	18	0	9	1.97
7. The homilist invites my input and feedback.	51.5	15	24	9	0	1.91
8. I give feedback to a homilist when his preaching is poor.	51.5	45.5	3	0	0	1.52
9. The homilist and I discuss the message and goal of the upcoming homily.	78.8	12	9	0	0	1.30

cal leaders has to adapt to open the conversation and make it fruitful. “On a parish level there has to be a sense of trust, respect, and relationship so that staff and congregation feel free and are encouraged to critique the preaching...on a wider level, catechists need some pedagogical formation so that they can [help] preachers to preach.”

Diocesan and national catechetical leaders also offer suggestions to the broader church: 1) Initiatives are most effective when initiated by the bishops;¹⁴ 2) Require (as in all other professions) ongoing formation of clergy; 3) Encourage conversation to determine the mind of the listeners; 4) Help preachers grow more fervent in their own faith life; 5) Invest time and resources into preaching improvement, with carefully crafted initiatives based on good data; 6) Create diocesan structures for continual assessment and accountability, evaluate all homilists;¹⁵ 7) Bishops can be a role model by strengthening their own homilies so that the people encounter Jesus Christ through their words.

Tiptoeing into this conversation is a first step.¹⁶ There are pockets where Catholic preaching is done well. There is much hope. Catechetical leaders describe the ideal for preaching as life-giving, engaging, connecting to everyday life, enthusiastic; it brings people into the church. When asked her vision for the Sunday homily, an archdiocesan director of evangelization

and catechesis said, “WOW!! Life changing, enriching faith, disciples on mission in the world.” The opportunity for the impact of Sunday preaching is tremendous. The untapped resources among the laity are vast.

Pope Francis writes that a concern for the quality of the Sunday homily is a profoundly spiritual matter — it will require all of our talents and creativity to further this mission. “At the same time, it shows a fine, active love of neighbor by refusing to offer to others a [homily] of poor quality.”¹⁷ His zeal is a call to catechetical leaders as well as to preachers. Let us gently nudge the elephant out of the room and, in love, open up the

TABLE THREE

There are structures in place for parish staff to offer their insights into preaching.

Strongly agree	3%
Somewhat agree	9%
Neither agree or disagree	12%
Somewhat disagree	29%
Strongly disagree	47%

conversation about preaching. There is no effort too good for the faith of our people. ■

Karla Bellinger is the director of the Center for Preaching, Evangelization, and Prayer. Contact her at KarlaBellinger@gmail.com.

ENDNOTES

- 1 From my doctoral thesis study of 561 Catholic high school youth, I unearthed a statistically significant correlation between the quality of the homily and the quantity of substantive discussion between the preacher and his Mass-attending youth. This focus group question sought to ascertain if this correlation also holds true for catechetical leaders at the parish, diocesan, and national levels. Source: *Are You Talking to Me? A Study of Young Listeners' Connection with Catholic Sunday Preaching*, DMin thesis, Aquinas Institute, May 2012.
- 2 United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Preaching the Mystery of Faith*, November, 2012, 17.
- 3 Pope Francis, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium (EG)*, #137.
- 4 Ibid. # 143.
- 5 Catechetical preaching has been the topic of conversation for the Catholic Association of Teachers of Homiletics (CATH), both in an evening session at the US Catholic Bishops' conference for teachers of homiletics at the University of Notre Dame in June, 2013, and at the CATH annual meeting in Louisville in December, 2013.
- 6 A complete report of survey results can be found at: <http://www.thecenterforpep.com/our-work/research-initiatives/the-catechesis-in-preaching-initiative/>. The words of catechetical leaders are also peppered throughout the author's book *Connecting Pulpit and Pew: Breaking Open the Conversation about Catholic Preaching*, published by Liturgical Press in the spring of 2014.
- 7 Though only indicative of those surveyed and not to be extrapolated as a nationally representative statistic, this data point parallels the study of young listeners who regularly attend Mass: 38% similarly said, "No, I would not recommend" the homily last heard. In any other interchange with those who are "regulars" and have bought into the "product", that would be an unacceptably high level of dissatisfaction. The target for an acceptable dissatisfaction rate is to be below 10-12%, for negative word-of-mouth is costly to any organization.
- 8 *EG* #135.
- 9 Ibid.
- 10 From the 62 dioceses represented, 56.8% of the respondents were parish leaders; 39.5% ministered at the national and diocesan levels (3.7% marked other). To paint a picture of what is happening on the ground, this particular set of results was filtered to include parish leaders only.
- 11 The youth study revealed a similar trend; see endnote 1.
- 12 See Peter Lovrick, "A Pedagogical Model for Homiletics at St. Augustine's Seminary: They Must Increase, and I Must Decrease," DMin thesis, Aquinas Institute, 2009, 35: 81.8% of those in his Toronto diocese considered themselves good to excellent; and David J. Shea, "Self-Understanding in Catholic Preaching: How the Identity of the Priest Shapes his Approach to Preaching," DMin thesis, Aquinas Institute, 2006, 72: 82% in his Cincinnati diocese considered themselves above average or better: a remarkable consistency.
- 13 The smiley face was drawn in the original.
- 14 The publishing of the 2012 preaching statement, *Preaching the Mystery of Faith* was a collaboration of seven national offices, a healthy step in highlighting the importance of the Sunday homily.
- 15 Inconsistency (in any field) arises from a lack of accountability.
- 16 Many thanks to Lee Nagel, Bill Miller, and Joanie McKewon for making this study possible.
- 17 *EG* # 156.



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The power of the tweet

Claire M. McManus



Woody Allen once quipped, “Eighty percent of success is showing up.” This is great advice for the evangelizer, and is the fundamental inspiration behind Pope Francis’ foray into the Twitterverse. If the goal is to show up, then Pope Francis has shown up on over 10 million smart phones.

A BLESSING AND A CURSE

The power to reach millions with a single tweet is both blessing and curse. Monsignor Paul Tighe, the Secretary of the Pontifical Council for Social Communications, said that when Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI launched his Twitter account there was a great deal of negativity.

But some of that negativity was a way of expressing frustration and genuine concerns. Does that make sense? You could learn something and understand why some people were irritated and annoyed with the church and what the main upsets were, what was keeping them away, and what was making them deaf to our message, because they were revealing a lot of themselves, even if what on the surface seemed extremely negative.

Pope Francis has been fearless in his interaction with the world, and this has carried over to his Twitter use. Despite the risk of attracting objectors and adversaries, Pope Francis has been tweeting messages of mercy, love, and peace to his millions of followers, in several languages, including Latin! His messages are laden with gospel themes, most often involving mercy and forgiveness. He reminds his followers that God has a plan for them, and when this message shows up on one of those 10 million smart phones, it is both personal and challenging. The power of Twitter, though formidable, is only as effective as the sender. Let’s not lose sight of the important fact that Pope Francis precedes and follows up his Twitter feed with poignant encounters of the real, physical kind.

TIME TO RIDE THE WAVE

The seismic wave generated by Pope Francis’ radical compassion is an opportunity for all of us to grab a board and ride it home. When the USCCB uploaded a video montage to Youtube depicting people basking in the warmth of Pope Francis’ embrace, they titled it, “Open Your Hearts to Life.” This beautiful video was tweeted to the world, thus driving

home the church’s message that Pro-life is seamless and timeless—from cradle to grave. With a simple click of our smart phones we can retweet this message to the world; a potential for disseminating the word that the four Evangelists could never imagine. Msgr. Tighe, speaking at the 2013 New Media Conference in Boston, explained the power of the retweet.

We’re told that for a public figure that @Pontifex has probably the highest level of retweeting that you get in terms of percentage of followers. That means the message is not only being received by the people who follow @Pontifex, but also by those who receive

it because of someone’s retweet; that’s when we’re reaching people who might not ordinarily choose to expose themselves to gospel messages or to the thought of the church.

*Twitter conversations,
when infused with the gospel,
can gather many disparate people
into a force that the world can’t ignore.*

Twitter conversations, when infused with the gospel, can gather many disparate people into a force that the world can’t ignore. In March of 2013, Pope Francis threw out the hashtag “Pray for Peace” in response to the escalation of violence in Syria. Follow the hashtag and you will find a conversation that crossed continental, political, and religious divides. Archbishop Celli, President of the Pontifical Council of Social Media, uses the image of scattering the seed. “One doesn’t know where it is going to end up. One doesn’t know whether it will land on fertile or hostile ground. But the possibility exists that a word or message that will always be rooted in the gospel is going to touch somebody’s heart.”

The most important role we have as evangelizers is to be scatterers of seed. The exponential growth of followers that have been drawn in by Pope Francis may be attracted by a phenomenon, but they cannot escape the message that he has delivered. This is the real power that we can harness with Twitter. As Msgr. Tighe reminds us, “We’re bringing people to Christ. In doing so, we’re walking on the ground of mystery, where a person encounters Jesus in conscience. That’s something extraordinarily personal. The Pope has said that the encounter is personal. We can’t manipulate it. We can’t engineer it. We have to allow the mystery to happen when Christ touches the other person and respect the integrity of that encounter.” If we can distill the message down to 140 characters, we’ve got ourselves a tweet! ■

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31 Days to Becoming a Better Religious Educator

By Jared Dees | Reviewed by Pam Fischer



Have you asked yourself, “How can I enhance or renew my catechetical program and better serve the children and youth in my program?” In *31 Days to Becoming a Better Religious Educator*, Jared Dees offers a medley of simple, practical, and tangible ideas and strategies to enhance parish faith formation programs and religion education in Catholic schools.

Dees challenges us to focus on those whom we teach, and more importantly, on what we are teaching. As disciples, we must realize the magnitude of how we witness God’s teachings. Dees has separated this into four parts, with each part taking about seven days to cover: Become a better disciple, Become a better servant, Become a better leader, Become a better teacher.

A THREE-STEP PROCESS

Each week, the reader encounters a Scripture passage that links to an exercise. Then, a brief explanation of the exercise

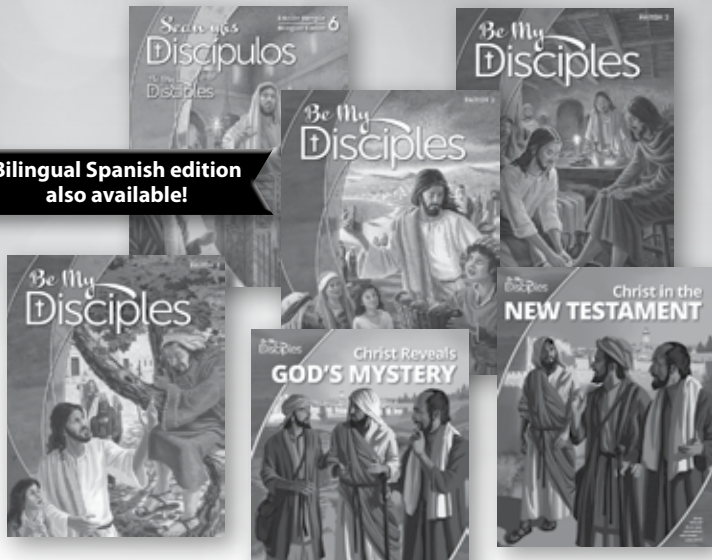
and why it is important to religious educators is given. Next, the reader moves on to the daily exercise, which gives the religious educator a theory to ponder and implement into lesson(s). The final daily step is “going deeper,” spending time in prayer and reflection.

Dees puts discipleship in the forefront; we, as religious educators, must take a serious look at ourselves and “take stock” of how we are nurturing our personal call to discipleship. We need to take into account several things: What is my personal relationship with Jesus Christ? Am I reading the Scriptures? Am I studying and reading about the lives of the saints? How is my prayer life? It is often said that imitation is the best form of flattery; do you recall a favorite teacher? What did he or she do to earn that honor for you? Are we imitating that characteristic or quality? Examine what kind of disciple you are; now ask yourself, “Is this the kind of disciple I want to be?”

Becoming a better servant is the focus of the second week. As a religious educator for over 20 years, I still search out ways

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of becoming a “better” servant. Dees shares many thought-worthy statements about the attitude of being servants. His statements below have sparked me to ask, “What can I do this week to help my students become better followers of Jesus?”

“The more we focus on what our students need to learn rather than what we want to teach, the more success we will have in the classroom” (39). And, “Nobody cares how much you know, until they know how much you care” (49).

A CHILD OF GOD

We need to be conscious of who our students are. Not just as “so-and-so’s child,” but a child created in the image and likeness of God. We need to know them as people and let them know we care.

In week three, Dees addresses how to become a better leader. He focuses on the structure that takes place in the classroom — procedures *and* rules — and discusses the differences between them. He gives several key approaches to dealing with how to structure effective learning environments. He encourages creativity and thinking “outside of the box,” and recommends displaying set classroom guidelines. Dees provides practical ideas for his suggestions which makes it easy for the reader to implement.

Week four focuses on how to become a better teacher. I like Dee’s GPS analogy: As teachers write lesson plans, they like to know the direction in which their lesson is headed. A good teacher will be able to “recalculate” as the lesson progresses. Our students are basically the “drivers” of the lesson and sometimes in order to arrive at our destination, we must be patient and willing to listen; we must observe what is happening and be open to the idea of having to “recalculate” as the way to achieve the desired outcome of the lesson.

BE A LIVING EXAMPLE OF FAITH

The 31st chapter of Dees’ book is the key to the whole book. You and I are to be the witnesses of the gospel to our students. We, as baptized Christians, need to be living examples of our faith. Dees provides an extraordinary tool to help us on the journey. Enjoy his strategies and develop a few of your own. Become the religious educator you want to be — one who cares. **!**

Pam Fischer is currently a Parish Catechetical Leader in the Diocese of Green Bay serving the community of St. Thomas the Apostle in Newton, WI. Contact her at faith1@lakefield.net.



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At Work in the Vineyard

Teresa (Teri) Burns



The people of the first century relied on the land for their livelihood, so Jesus used agricultural images in his teachings. He told stories of shepherds and sheep and parables about sowers and vineyards. He compared the kingdom of God to scattered seed (Mk 4:26-29) and a harvest (Mt 9:35-38). He related his stories and teachings to the experience of the people.

While our culture isn't predominantly agricultural anymore, we can still understand Jesus' images. Many people still have ties to farming, or at least gardening. Many of my relatives, including my grandparents, were farmers. I have wonderful memories of my grandparents' farm. So when Jesus talks about seeds and harvests, I recall real images and good memories. We can apply Jesus' agricultural images to the ministry of the parish catechetical leader (PCL), to Jesus' image of working in a vineyard.

PLANNING FOR A FRUITFUL VINEYARD

A vineyard owner needs to have a vision. If he is relying on the harvest to sustain his living, he will not simply grow some vines and pick the grapes. He needs to have the right plot of land, with adequate sunlight and moisture. He needs to cultivate the soil and care for the vines to produce the best crop of grapes. He must have a plan for gently pruning the vines to accommodate the best growth. He must recognize the best time to harvest the grapes so they don't become sour. And he is at the mercy of the elements. If there is a drought, too much rain, or a major storm, it will damage the crop.

Being a PCL also takes vision and planning. An effective parish catechetical process involves cultivating the right environment. The PCL must be in tune with the faith and life needs of the people in the community. She needs to nurture the soil of lifelong learning and gently prune away those aspects that don't allow growth. She must read the signs of the times to adapt to the changing needs of the community.

A person cannot run a vineyard alone. Jesus tells the parable of the owner of the vineyard hiring day laborers to help with the work (Mt 20:1-16). The owner recognized that he needed many hands to do the work. As the day progressed, the owner recognized the need for additional help, so he went back to

the marketplace to hire more people again and again. In the same way, PCLs cannot do the work of catechesis alone. PCLs must follow the example of the vineyard owner and "go into the marketplace." The owner didn't simply put up a flyer or place an ad in the town newspaper; he physically went into the marketplace, where the workers would be. PCLs, too, must go directly to the people. We cannot just put an article in the bulletin or ask Father to make an announcement and sit back and wait. The best recruiting tool is direct contact. When we explain our vision and discuss how others can help, they are more likely to get involved.

Being a PCL also takes vision and planning. An effective parish catechetical process involves cultivating the right environment.

TRAIN FOR ENGAGEMENT

Along with going to the people directly, we need to know how to engage people and empower them for ministry. Vineyard owners don't just send their workers into the fields without

training. They want to ensure that the workers know how to correctly prune the vines and harvest the grapes. PCLs cannot just get "a warm body" and put them in front of a group. We need to adequately train our catechists and other ministry volunteers. Just as the vineyard owner gives his workers the right tools, PCLs need to provide the right resources to empower the catechists and all in the parish community to grow in and pass on the faith.

Jesus was wise in his use of images and comparisons. The image of the vineyard is full of insights for PCLs to be effective leaders and evangelizers. We will continue to explore these concepts and present information for parish catechetical ministry in future PCL Perspectives columns. Share your suggestions for future topics with any of the PCL Forum Animators: Brigid Johnson, brigidjohnson@yahoo.com, Immaculate Conception Parish, Knoxville, TN; Judith Brusseau, jbrusseau@trinity.org, Holy Trinity Church, Washington, DC; Sara Carey, saracarey@frontiernet.net, St. Alphonsus, Crossville, TN; Teri Burns, tburnszoo@hotmail.com, St. Robert of Newminster Parish, Ada, MI; Joanie McKeown, jmckncl@email.com, Board Liaison. ■

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Five best practices for engaging parents

Leisa Anslinger



Occasionally, parish leaders ask me what I would do if I were them, as they seek strategies and dream of possibilities for evangelizing parents. Every pastoral situation is different, and practices must be responsive to the needs and dynamics of the local community. With that in mind, here are a few

ideas I often share, based in engagement and other social science research and effective practices of parishes I have visited:

1. ESTABLISH CLEAR EXPECTATIONS

This gets complicated, since, as a priest asked recently in a workshop, “How do we state expectations without making people angry or scaring them off?” There is a fine balance in the ways in which we identify and express our expectations; when those hopes and dreams have been culled through conversations with parish leaders and prayerful discernment, the result is a foundation upon which we may build an evangelizing environment for all.

2. MEET WITH PARENTS AT LEAST ONCE PER YEAR

One of the most creative ideas I have heard in recent years is also one of the simplest. A parish was concerned by its declining participation on religious education, and decided to do what they called “five in five.” Their pastoral council members offered to help with the process in order to provide enough listening ears for the process. Every household was asked to come to register for the coming year of religious education in person. In addition to completing their registration, they were asked five questions in five minutes:

- * What is the best thing you experience in religious formation for your children?
- * What do you wish we would consider?
- * Is the time our session is offered the best for your family?
- * What questions do you have for us?
- * What do you most need to grow in your relationship with Christ?

The response was overwhelmingly positive, and the value of information they received was immeasurable! Many of the conversations took more than five minutes as a result of the parents’ participation in the process.

3. MAKE A COVENANT

If I were to hold such a conversation, I would conclude it by sharing a covenant that expresses the expectations discussed above with the parents. What are typical expectations?

- * Participation in Sunday Mass
- * Participation in adult faith formation
- * Commitment to the child’s faith formation, exhibited through participation in parent meetings and regular session attendance
- * Service within the parish and beyond it
- * Stewardship of resources

As the parent completes the registration packet, he or she also signs the covenant commitment. Often the covenant includes some statement of the parish’s commitment to their families:

- * Liturgies that are well-prepared and celebrated
- * Quality faith formation for all
- * Opportunities for spiritual growth
- * Opportunities for service and outreach
- * Effective and timely communication
- * Pastoral care as needed

4. COACH PARENTS EVERY STEP OF THE WAY

Communicate regularly with parents between baptism and entry into the religious education process; make parent participation part of sacramental preparation; give parents help through well-developed written materials; communicate with them regularly through e-mail; be personally present to them as often as possible. Helping parents realize the best and most important gift they give their children is faith, lived out at home, and equipping them to do so is our greatest gift to them!

5. REMEMBER THAT EVANGELIZATION PRECEDES CATECHESIS

We are sometimes tempted to think that we can fill people’s heads with information or require their participation and make them disciples in the process. We know in our hearts this simply is not so; we must ask ourselves with every decision, in the development of processes, and in our daily interactions with people, if a relationship with Jesus Christ is the first and greatest goal of all that we do. In fact, when we have evangelization as our goal, all else falls into place. We do this most effectively by reaching out to people, person-to-person, recognizing that God has planted a desire deep within their hearts that can only be met through a relationship with God, a relationship of love, mercy, forgiveness, and friendship. ■

Leisa Anslinger is the director of Catholic Life & Faith, an online resource for helping leaders engage real people in real faith, catholiclifeandfaith.net. Contact her at leisaanslinger@gmail.com.

Original Sin

Chris Chapman



In evangelizing and catechesis, it is important that we set the stage for the good news. We must articulate the “bad news:” the doctrine that the human race, and each person in particular, is in a predicament that cannot be solved without the direct intervention of God. In short, we need to

teach about original sin.

Original sin is one reality having two parts:

1. The historical act of disobedience by the first two human persons
2. The deficient situation of every human person — other than the Blessed Mother — as a consequence of that first act.

Although the first chapters of Genesis contain mythopoeic elements such as references to the days of creation and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, we should be clear that not everything is symbolic. Our descent from one man and one woman is not symbolic. It is the teaching of the church that all of humanity is descended from one set of original parents, whom we refer to as “Adam” and “Eve” (CCC 355-379 and *Humani Generis*, 37). It was this man and woman, Adam and Eve, who disobeyed God in some fundamental way which brought such a great weight of punishment onto humanity. And what was it that we lost? Most importantly, we lost our friendship with God. God never ceased loving us, but *we ceased* having the ability to love God. God warned that eating from the tree would bring death; the initial death was spiritual, which led to the further consequence of physical death — the separation of our soul from the body. Physical death and spiritual death are intimately linked. Jesus reverses the punishment by fully restoring our relationship with God. The full fruit of that will be our resurrected bodies, where the physical effects of death will be completely undone and we will see God face to face (CCC 1028).

The second sense of original sin can also be referred to as *concupiscence*. Our minds have been darkened and our wills have been weakened. We no longer see the truth as clearly and easily as we originally did, and we have a more difficult time choosing what is good, even when we know what the

good is. This also accounts for the fractured relationship that we have with God, neighbor, the world, and even the fractured relationship within our own person, both body and soul (CCC 2514-15). Original sin fractured everything.

Finally and perhaps most mysteriously, the original act of disobedience put us under the sway of the fallen angels in a way God never intended. Jesus refers to Satan as the “Ruler of this world” (Jn 16:11), and so he is for those who do not know Jesus Christ.

So what might this mean in a catechetical setting?

- * This knowledge can lead to greater compassion; we are all in the same leaky boat. The church is the non-leaking boat sent to save us.
- * We should increase our desire to evangelize! We need Jesus Christ and his grace.
- * We can be more urgent and patient with ourselves. Knowing that concupiscence remains should encourage us to frequent the sacraments more, all the while knowing that we are loved even in our weakened state.
- * We should intercede in prayer for any and all. We all need help.
- * We know that we have a deeper and fuller picture of the world than those who do not know the gospel. Hearing the gospel is already healing our darkened intellects. This should give us humble confidence to catechize and evangelize.
- * Celebrate your baptismal feast day! This was the day all of the merits of Christ were applied to you, beginning your own transformation and healing. This is an especially good opportunity to catechize within the family.

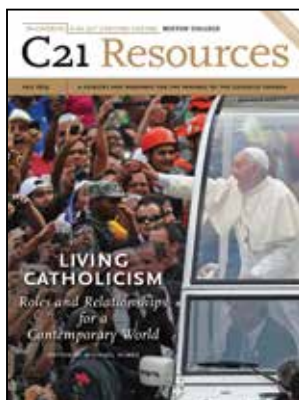
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Without Jesus Christ we would have no hope; with him we have every hope. The original disobedience of our parents has been undone by the New Adam and the New Eve. It is only in the context of the bad news that the good news can be known with clarity and joy. ■

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Books, websites, and media for the enrichment of the parish catechetical leader

Compiled by Dan Pierson



C21 Resources from Boston College

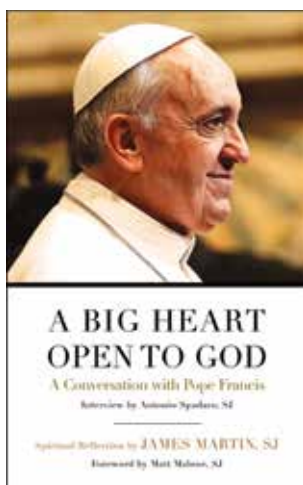
C21 Resources, a service of Boston College's Church in the 21st Century Center, is a publication that reprints articles and presentations around a central theme in each issue. The present issue is: *Living Catholicism: Roles and Relationships for a Contemporary World*. Past themes have included:

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- Encountering Jesus in the Scriptures
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Of special interest to catechetical leaders, catechists, and parents is the Fall 2012 issue themed, *Handing on the Faith*.

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In his column, "Of Many Things," Malone explained that this is the first time *America* has undertaken such an ambitious program of content devoted to a single subject. "We will produce original content across all our platforms: in print, on the Web, through social media, through video, and through person-to-person events. *The Living Word* is also a first in that *America* is co-sponsoring this project with the American Bible Society, an interdenominational Christian ministry that has been engaging people with God's word for nearly 200 years."

The Living Word will be organized around five themes, each of which was treated in the council's document.

- * Conversion through Scripture
- * Praying with Scripture
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- * Scripture and the Arts
- * Theology of Scripture

This project will offer an excellent collection of resources for the continuing education of all catechetical leaders and a time to develop continuing education for catechists and programs for Bible study and engagement. |

*Dan Pierson served as director of religious education for the Diocese of Grand Rapids for 17 years and is the founder of faithAlivebooks.com and eCatechist.com. He is co-author with Susan Stark of *What Do I Do Now? A Guide for the Reluctant Catechist* (Pflaum Publishing). Please send suggestions and recommendations to pierson.dj@gmail.com.*

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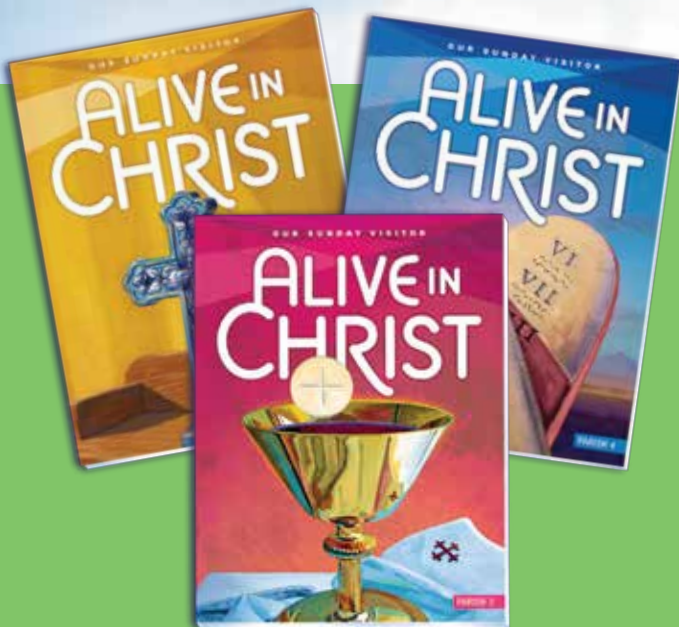
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