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CATECHETICAL
LEADER



THE FAMILY OF FAITH

IN THIS ISSUE:

Six Ways to Strengthen
Families in Your Parish
Called to be Witnesses
in the New Evangelization
Rural Catechesis

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CATECHETICAL LEADER Table of Contents

November 2013

In Every Issue

- 4 **From the President** Bill Miller
We Are Always Catechists
- 5 **From the Executive Director** Leland Nagel
For Our Beloved Dead
- 24 **Transforming, Evangelizing Catechesis** Lois DeFelice
Here's the Church, Where Are the People?
- 26 **Book Review** Reviewed by Dan Thomas
*Evolution of the Word:
The New Testament in the Order the Books Were Written*
- 28 **New Evangelization** Claire M. McManus
on a New Continent
God's Facebook
- 29 **Diocesan Director's Forum** Maria Cruz-Córdoba
The NCCL Experience
- 30 **Engaging Parents** Leisa Anslinger
Recognizing God's Movement
- 31 **Notable Resources** Dan Pierson

Features

- 6 **Catechesis: Six Ways to Strengthen Families in Your Parish** Karen Pesek
- 10 **Connecting with Parents: Seven Skills That Will Make Your Job Easier** Claudio A. Mora
- 12 **Life Long Faith Formation** Jane Angha
- 16 **Called to be Witnesses in the New Evangelization — Lessons from the Saints** Sara Blauvelt
- 21 **Rural Catechesis** Donald R. Kurre



Catechesis: Six Ways to Strengthen Families in Your Parish page 6



Life Long Faith Formation
page 12



Called to be Witnesses in the New Evangelization — Lessons from the Saints
page 16



Rural Catechesis
page 21

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WE ARE ALWAYS CATECHISTS

Bill Miller

National Conference For Catechetical Leadership



My father was blessed with tremendous mechanical talent. One of my favorite stories, gleaned from my father's 30-year career as a hardware store owner, helps me understand how much I learned from him.

One day Tom, a bright young man, came into the store with a huge list of plumbing supplies that he needed for a major remodeling project for his modest home. Dad spent nearly an hour with him, helping Tom figure out exactly what he would need and how all the pieces would fit together in order to do the job properly. During the process, Tom had many questions...and dad had the answers. My father was relying on his experience as a plumber from many years of following his call.

Eventually, my dad said to Tom, "I am curious as to why you have come to my small store to purchase these items. I know that you work in a large discount store that carries most of this. And because you work there and receive an employee discount, you could have purchased these things at a huge savings."

Tom said, "Mr. Miller, it's true that I could have purchased all of this very cheaply at that store. However, there is no one there who could show me what to do with it once I got it home. You not only showed me exactly what I needed, but you took me through every step of the assembly process. Now I can go home and do this myself."

Many times through the years I have regaled people with stories demonstrating the incredible gift my father possessed for "working with his hands." However, it was only recently that I realized that one of dad's greatest gifts was his ability to teach. Because he knew his profession so well, he was always teaching others about some aspect of it. His mechanical ability and his wisdom in knowing how and when to demonstrate it was a great help to many people, customers and non-customers alike. Even in casual conversations with others — on the golf course, in the grocery store, at a restaurant — dad was helping

people solve their "mechanical problems." It all came naturally to him...and many, many people were grateful.

Over the years, I learned some valuable "mechanical lessons" from my father; but, more importantly, I learned numerous significant life lessons. He was always teaching me something, just by living the way he lived. By virtue of our baptism, we are commissioned to demonstrate the love of God to those we encounter...showing them how it forms us, sustains us, and propels us forward in life.

With this in mind, when I do a workshop on catechesis, I often remind catechists that we are always catechizing... inside and outside the classroom. The more we recognize that fact, the more likely we will be to make sure that our actions in each moment give witness to the loving relationship we share with Jesus Christ. As catechists, in the general sense of the word, we have all the physical tools...Sacred Scripture, church documents, the wisdom of the saints, etc. Are we using them properly, both inside and outside the classroom? Do the stories of our lives reflect the love story of our relationship with God? Are we willing to call upon our bountiful life experiences in order to give witness to God's love? We have dedicated our lives to building the reign of God. In a sense, our success in doing so can only be measured by how well we give witness (with our actions) to that which we proclaim with our mouths.

Many years after he and my uncle retired and sold the store, I asked my father if he was disappointed that I did not take over for him in the business. In his own gentle way he said, "I didn't think you were that interested in the hardware; I thought you would probably be a teacher." His answer was both wise and a bit ironic. Only now do I realize that he and I are even more alike than I ever imagined. It causes me to smile...widely, warmly. ■

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FOR OUR BELOVED DEAD

Leland Nagel



“For the most poor, forgotten souls in purgatory, we pray to the Lord.” Without fail, that intention was spoken aloud by the same person every single day at morning Mass. It has been almost 25 years since I heard Sophie pray those words at morning Mass; God rest her soul. Nevertheless, they enter my mind every time I hear the celebrant at Mass ask, “And for what else shall we pray?” Even though Sophie herself has been dead for more than 25 years, her intention continues to live in my heart and moves into my consciousness.

November is the month of the poor souls. I was raised with the belief that those of us still living can help those in purgatory by prayers, almsgiving, and especially by the Sacrifice of the Mass. This practice stems from the “Church’s understanding that the graces that flow from the Sacrifice of the Mass can benefit even those who have already died” (*Tools for Rebuilding*, 168). This has been so ingrained in my generation that I know people who rarely attend Mass themselves but still will have “a Mass said” for one of their deceased parents and sometimes even attend themselves on the day when their Mass intention is offered. Ironically, they are more likely to attend if they know the intention is announced at the start of Mass or the intention is published in the weekly bulletin.

Fr. Michael White and Tom Corcoran in their newest book, *Tools for Rebuilding*, express this caution: “Mass intentions are a lovely custom with a profound spiritual value, for the living and the deceased. When, however, they promote consumerism, when they communicate that church is an insider’s club for people who are buying their own salvation and getting their friends in on their ticket too, that’s a problem” (170).

The *National Directory for Catechesis* states, “popular piety is a vital element in Catholic life that is expressed in a wide variety of popular devotions, such as various forms of prayers for the souls in purgatory” (38B, 152-153). Many churches invite parishioners to bring pictures of deceased loved ones. In addition to reciting the names of those who have gone before us, these pictures help us recognize all who are part of the family of God. We pray for them to join the communion of saints. Our prayer provides comfort to those who remain here on earth in addition to helping the beloved dead on their journey to heaven.

As catechetical leaders, we must pay “careful attention to the role of popular piety in many people’s lives” (USCCB, *Together a New People*, no. 31). Our challenge is to ensure that these popular devotions provide opportunities to encounter Christ. If popular piety “is well oriented, above all by a pedagogy of evangelization, it is rich in values. It manifests a thirst for God which only the simple and poor can know. It makes people capable of generosity and sacrifice” (*Ecclesia in America*, no. 16).

While *Día de los Muertos* and All Souls’ Day both remember the dead, they are not the same. For three days, in cemeteries and homes, Mexicans and Mexican Americans come together to remember their deceased loved ones. The last of the *Día de los Muertos* falls on November 2, All Souls’ Day, which remembers and prays for “all the faithful departed.” It is valuable to bring the best of both of these celebrations together.

The Commemoration of All the Faithful Departed is a time when we can pray for the dead and also expand our traditional understanding of family. Here is an opportunity where having people bring pictures of those who died within the last year helps create a portrait of the family of God beyond one’s own family. After all, one is baptized into God’s family. As the *United States Catholic Catechism for Adults* states, “We pray for those in purgatory, that they may soon be with God in heaven” (161).

This November, when you remember and pray for those who have died in your own family and those who have died in your parish family, don’t forget to pray for all the faithful departed. As catechetical leaders, consider how we might work with our liturgists towards engaging the hearts, minds, and imaginations of our faith communities in making the connections.

Remember the consistent commitment of Sophie to pray “for the most poor forgotten souls in purgatory” and carry on for those both known and unknown who count on us, here on earth, to pray that those in purgatory might enter heaven with a heart full of love and be one with God. ■

Catechesis: Six Ways to Strengthen Families in Your Parish

Karen Pesek



The Bishops want it. Your own Bishop has stressed it. Your pastor is talking about it. You know you need to do what you can to help strengthen families in your parish. But how?

Consider incorporating at least one of the following ideas into your plans for next year:

1. LISTEN

Stop before you create one more program or another calendar of activities! Do you really know what the families in your parish need to raise faith-filled disciples? Have you intentionally sought out those who are missing from your catechetical programs and asked them why they are not participating? Try a variety of methods to elicit a response. Listen with compassion, not defensiveness. After all, catechists are to serve the parents in their role as the primary educators of their children. Be open and creative in “listening” the whole year, not just for a few weeks.

Consider surveys in the pews, e-mail, or text links to online surveys which are well crafted. Invite several parents at a time for informal conversations, choose a few families per week to phone, and visit families in their homes when possible. The important point here is to listen to their hopes and needs, and then partner with the parents. Parishes don't need to create “consumers” of services parishes provide. Religious educators have often created situations where we are the experts and dispense the knowledge necessary for faith formation. Research tells us that the most powerful influence on the faith of children is the faith and spiritual practices of the parents. Catholic parents are no longer supported by close-knit communities which provide social and spiritual support. Those parents who do show up at our parishes are seeking meaningful, relevant experiences for themselves and their children. These experiences may not look like the same events that shaped most of us currently in ministry. The Good News is the same. The ways people hear and experience this message needs to change.

Take the parish census and create a list of all the families with school-age children who are registered. Take out the families who send their children to Catholic school and who actively participate in the parish religious education program. Begin contacting each family left on your list. Find out about their family

situation. What would bring them back? If you have to discontinue an existing program or project to make time for this, do it!

2. EDUCATE YOURSELF

What do some of the major documents of the church say to us regarding Catholic families? How does this impact your ministry? Could you take time at each staff meeting to reflect on one of these quotes? Here are a few passages to get you started:

The catechesis given by parents with the family ‘precedes, accompanies and enriches all other forms of catechesis.’ When children are baptized, parents accept the responsibility to bring up their children in the practice of the faith and to see to it that the divine life that God gives them is kept safe from the poison of sin, to grow always stronger in their hearts. At the same time, the Church promises to help parents foster their children’s faith and assists them specifically in their role as catechists of their children, whether they assume complete responsibility themselves or look to the parish school or religious education program for help and support. (*National Directory of Catechesis*, 235)

* * *

The fruitfulness of conjugal love extends to the fruits of the moral, spiritual, and supernatural life that parents hand on to their children by education. Parents are the principal and first educators of their children. In this sense the fundamental task of marriage and family is to be at the service of life. (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1653)

* * *

In our own time, in a world often alien and even hostile to faith, believing families are of primary importance as centers of living, radiant faith. For this reason the Second Vatican Council, using an ancient expression, calls the family the *ecclesia domestica*. It is in the bosom of the family that parents are ‘by word and example ... the first heralds of the faith with regard to their children.’ (*CCC*, 1656)

* * *



Photo by Joseph Kranak

The fecundity of conjugal love cannot be reduced solely to the procreation of children, but must extend to their moral education and their spiritual formation. ‘*The role of parents in education* is of such importance that it is almost impossible to provide an adequate substitute.’ The right and the duty of parents to educate their children are primordial and inalienable. (CCC, 2221)

* * *

Parents have the first responsibility for the education of their children. They bear witness to this responsibility first by *creating a home* where tenderness, forgiveness, respect, fidelity, and disinterested service are the rule. The home is well suited for *education in the virtues*. (CCC, 2223)

The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops has a Committee on Laity, Marriage, Family Life, and Youth. You will find major projects on marriage and family life at this site: uscbb.org/about/laity-marriage-family-life-and-youth

Read one of the recent books on the challenges the church faces in the United States today:

- * *Forming Intentional Disciples: The Path to Knowing and Following Jesus* by Sherry A. Weddell
- * *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* by Christian Smith with Melinda Lundquist Denton

- * *Souls in Transition: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adults* by Christian Smith with Patricia Snell
- * *Rebuilt* by Michael White and Tom Corcoran

Do you know about *Strong Catholic Families: Strong Catholic Youth*? This is a joint project from the National Federation for Catholic Youth Ministry (NFCYM), National Conference for Catechetical Leadership (NCCL), National Association of Catholic Family Life Ministers (NACFLM), and the National Catholic Educational Association (NCEA). Find out if your diocese is participating in this project. This is not “just another program.” The *Strong Catholic Families* process consists of four steps that lead to many opportunities for growth in faith within families and the entire faith community. (nfcym.org/programs/Training/strongfamilies.htm)

Caution: Reading these books, reflecting on the teachings of the church, and becoming involved in *Strong Catholic Families* may create a paradigm shift in how you work with families. Are you open and ready for this?

3. TAKE A FAMILY CENTERED APPROACH

Ministries of the parish should support the family. Think of the family as a unit, and not as individual members of the parish. For example, are the children scheduled to serve at a different Mass from the parent who lectors, ushers, or serves as Communion minister? Are religious education classes for various age groups scheduled at different times or days, requiring parents to travel to and from the church more than once? Are meetings or activities scheduled during meal times, especially

during the work week? Could a preparation meeting for first Eucharist include a family activity instead of requiring the parents to either split up or hire a sitter for the evening? Do parents with special needs children feel welcome and supported at Mass and catechetical activities? Could Wednesday evening catechetical sessions begin with a family meal that includes the catechists? How are new parents supported by the community after they present their child for baptism? Are there ways for new parents to connect with experienced parents so they learn good Catholic parenting? Find creative ways to connect families across generations. Does the parish as a whole focus on supporting family life? Are there opportunities for families to engage in service to others? Are parents shown how to pray with their children at home, and in a variety of ways to meet the developing needs of their children? Do couples raising children feel supported and encouraged by the faith community?

4. HONOR YOUR OWN FAMILY

Lay ecclesial ministers are normally hard working and generous folks. Is your family time sacred? Be sure to tend and water the garden of your own family so that it is a sacrament and not a counter sign to the community. Take regular time off to be with your family. Practice what you preach!

5. THE EIGHTH SACRAMENT

On March 25, 2013, Pope Francis gave a homily on the Gospel reading from Mark 10. In this reflection, the Holy Father explained, “Christians who ask to be let in should never find doors closed. Churches are not offices where documents and letters are presented when someone is hoping to enter God’s grace.” He gave two scenarios to illustrate this. First, a young couple goes to the church office to ask about getting married. Instead of being welcomed and congratulated, they instead receive a list of requirements, costs, and the documents needed to get married in that parish.

In another example, he describes a young single woman who goes to the parish to request baptism for her infant. She is denied because she is not married. Pope Francis continues, “Look at this girl who had the courage to carry her pregnancy to term” and not to have an abortion. “What does she find? A closed door, as do so many.” This is not good pastoral zeal, it distances people from the Lord and does not open doors. So when we take this path... we are not doing good to people, the People of God.” He says this is the eighth sacrament, “the sacrament of pastoral customs.”

Now, read your bulletin announcements and any communications regarding your catechetical programs.

Even if you are able to do nothing else, consider rewording communications from the parish. Is the parish a “guardian of the

Truth” or are the doors of faith wide open, inviting people to experience the love of Christ? Do the descriptions of the catechetical programs sound like activities a newcomer would be eager to join? Accept families where they are on the journey of faith, and walk along with them. Inspire them to holiness by your words and example. Sometimes a catechist needs to be a coach. We give those with whom we work support and encouragement, showing them various ways to reach the goals they seek.

Yes, ministry is messy. Just one family returning to the church may require special sessions for the children who missed one or more sacraments, an annulment for a parent, RCIA for another parent, and a lot of guidance and patience. There will be people who don’t fit into the schedules and programs you have carefully created.

Most people probably don’t register when we expect them to, fill out forms correctly, or even show up to events which we consider “required” to celebrate a sacrament. But if “the definitive aim of catechesis is to put people not only in touch, but also in communion and intimacy, with Jesus Christ,” (*General Directory for Catechesis*, 80) then at least our communication, both written and verbal, should sound like we believe this with all our hearts.

The next step is to meet as a staff and talk about the attitudes and approach you want to convey. How is this “eighth sacrament” lived out at your parish? Help the parish secretary understand the great importance of her role; she is frequently the greeter at the door of faith! Is the door opened with a smile and warm welcome? What would it take at your parish to make this happen?

6. YOU ARE NOT THE CONDUCTOR

It has been joked that if you cut an American Catholic, he bleeds Pelagianism. Pelagianism is the 5th century heresy that we can achieve our own salvation. If we just work or pray hard enough, we can achieve anything. It’s a part of the American “can do” attitude that is the envy of other nations. If we translate this into church ministry, it becomes a common trend among us: if we just do the right things, our parishes will be blossoming, vibrant communities. In a quote attributed to St. Augustine, “Pray as if everything depends on God, work as if everything depends on you.” So take heart and relax a bit. When asked what to do about a teenager who quit going to church, a wise Benedictine replied, “If he comes around to the church before he dies, that will be time enough.” We have an important part to play in God’s orchestra, but we aren’t the conductor. If we love our parish families rather than seeing them as problems to be fixed, God can do great things through us. |

Karen M. Pesek is the director of the Office of Religious Education for the Diocese of Springfield-Cape Girardeau, Missouri.

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be with your family.
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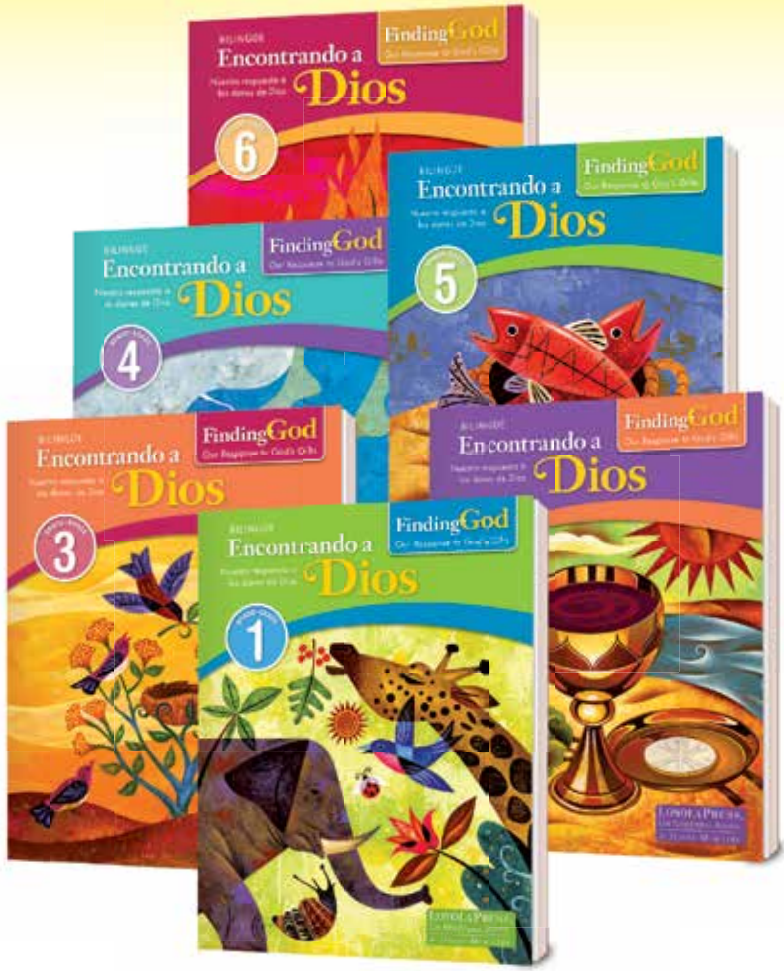
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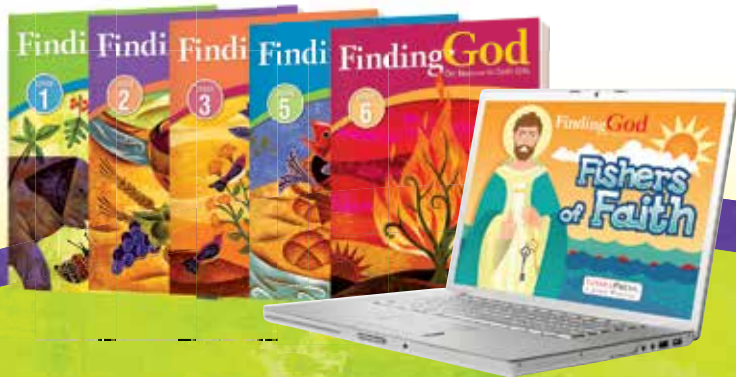
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Connecting with Parents: Seven Skills That Will Make Your Job Easier

Claudio A. Mora



Why is it important for a religious educator to have a good, solid, and strong connection with parents? In my years of ministry, I have often asked myself this question. After all, isn't the ministry of catechesis directed towards the children? And even more, why is it that parents don't respond to my requests,

don't attend my meetings, and don't comply with all the requirements of the religious education program? The answer is that many times we don't give parents all the credit they deserve for the job they are doing. We criticize them, making them turn against us instead of working together with them in the faith formation of their children. Here is some practical advice that will help you in your task of connecting with parents in the beautiful ministry of catechesis.

LISTENING

As catechetical leaders, many times we are overwhelmed with due dates, requirements, and things we need to get done. In our highly demanding world, we often forget the importance of listening to others, especially listening to the parents in their struggles and successes.

Try to make it a priority to listen to the stories behind the situations: happy situations bring a perfect occasion to celebrate success, difficult or challenging situations will bring you an opportunity to be the listening partner that parents usually need in their times of trial. Try to have a space in your office intentionally created for conversation. A couple of chairs facing each other, a prayer table with a Bible, a crucifix, a candle, and a plant/flowers will create the environment that is going to facilitate this process and will also send the message to the parents that you are a person who is available and willing to listen.

Take the first step, initiate conversation, and remember that there are people who will not take the risk of sharing their struggles with others; encourage parents to share with you those areas where they are being challenged the most.

PROVIDING SUPPORT

Spiritual Support: Praying for the parents of the children attending your religious education program is always a good idea. There are many ways in which you can offer your prayers for them:

- * Include them in the prayer intentions in Mass
- * Write a prayer for parents in the parish book of intentions
- * If you have a rosary group in the parish, ask them to include a prayer for the parents in their rosary
- * The same with charismatic prayer groups, perpetual adoration, etc.

Invite parents for a day of reflection whenever possible (being flexible and trying different times of the day, morning, afternoon, evenings, weekends, etc.), especially during Advent and Lent.

Parenting Support: Offer parents a variety of resources on parenting skills. Remember that nobody teaches us how to be good parents! Organizing conferences, talks, and discussion meetings about parenting skills will help parents to feel supported by the community.

Invite speakers who specialize in the area of child development, child education, child/youth counselors, etc. to come and share their expertise with parents. Be sure to offer printed and digital copies of those handouts to those who are not able to attend the sessions.

Religious Education/Faith Formation Support: As religious educators, we are very good at communicating to parents that they are the first catechists of their children, but sometimes we forget that they may not have enough formation to carry out this blessed responsibility. Make sure that parents feel supported and guided in the task of forming the faith of their children. Tell them what is expected from them, and give them enough resources to support their catechetical instruction, providing them with enough formation opportunities (both live and online) so they can continue developing their own faith. This will enable them to help their children in their faith development.

SETTING CLEAR EXPECTATIONS

In my experience, the main reason why parents didn't comply or didn't fully participate in the activities offered was because there was a lack of communication. Expectations were not always clearly explained, and therefore parents didn't give some requirements the necessary importance.

Set your expectations realistically and at the beginning of the catechetical year. Give them to the parents in writing, and take the time to explain them to the parents when they come to register their children for religious education or at the first parent meeting that you host at the beginning of the catechetical year. Have them available on the parish's webpage, and write little pieces of your expectations in your newsletter, explaining the reasons behind the expectations, guidelines, and requirements.

HELP PARENTS CONNECT WITH OTHER PARENTS

Let us remember that we need peers; we need the support of a community, and we need to know that we are not alone in whatever task we are involved in. Catholic parents need as much support as they can get, and that support can come from their own peers. When you facilitate the meeting among the parents in a relaxed and informal atmosphere, the exchange of experiences between them will be of unlimited value to all of them.

Organize a "coffee night for parents," or "morning tea for moms (and dads)," and provide childcare so parents will feel free to come by and join others who share their struggles and joys. Use your parish's webpage to facilitate a "Catholic parent's board" — a place where you can post a question or a thought and parents can exchange their answers and ideas.

KEEPING THEM INFORMED

Information is key when it comes to connecting with parents. If you want parents to do their part in the religious education of their children, they need information; they need to know their role in this task. This can only be accomplished by keeping them constantly informed.

Good communication with parents does not necessarily mean sending tons of flyers home. There are many other ways in which you can easily communicate with parents today: use e-mail, mass-distributed text messages, your parish's webpage, Facebook, Twitter, and any other social media tool you may have available.

Think about what it is that needs to be communicated. At the beginning of the year, parents need to know the calendar for the year, expectations related to parent meetings, or special classes they need to attend. During the year, they will need to be reminded of the upcoming activities pertaining to their children. All of this is high priority.

ADAPTING TO THEIR SCHEDULE

Parents today have a very busy lifestyle. They have to balance not only their schedules but also those of their children; let's remember that children today are involved in so many extra-curricular activities such as sports, dance, arts, music, that parents may be so exhausted and frustrated and feel they cannot fully participate in all that it is required from them. As religious educators, we need to be flexible and understanding of that situation.

You may want to be aware of the general activities going on in the community where you minister. Check your school district's calendar, take a look at the calendar of the main sport

programs children in your parish play, and make sure not to schedule important events around those days.

We need to offer a variety of schedules so parents can choose what is more convenient for them. Make sure to offer "makeup meetings" and other options for parents so they can still be informed and formed if they missed an important meeting or class.

Always have handouts of all the meetings and classes that you have, and offer them to parents as ways to still obtain some benefit of whatever was discussed in those meetings. Even though you can't always be available to meet with each parent individually, make sure they know they can find you when your schedule allows.

PRAISING THEM FOR THEIR EFFORTS

It is not easy being a Catholic parent today. We need to keep in mind that the world in which we live pulls people in different directions, and Catholic parents are struggling to be faithful to their call and educate their children in the faith. Make sure you praise their efforts to be involved in the religious formation of their children.

Offer incentives (prayer cards, rosaries, crucifixes, medals, certificates of achievement, etc.) that will keep them motivated, celebrate their achievements with special recognitions, both publicly and privately.

Write a "thank you" note and publish it in the parish bulletin acknowledging the efforts that parents are making. Make sure that you acknowledge parents as catechists and commission them on Catechetical Sunday.

Jesus connected with people through friendships. He called the disciples to come and follow him, and they became his friends: "I have called you friends, because I have told you everything I have heard from my Father" (Jn 15:15).

Connecting with parents should not be difficult if you have the right attitude that will allow you to start developing friendships with them. Many times we feel that we have to "educate" parents; we become the instructor and look at them as the learners. Both groups have many experiences and skills to learn from each other.

My advice to you is to partner with parents, make them an important component of your religious education program and make them your companions in the beautiful and challenging ministry of catechesis. Remember that to be a catechist is to facilitate an encounter between the children and God. I invite you to not only partner with parents but also to journey with them as they guide their children to a deeper and more personal encounter with our God. ■

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Life Long Faith Formation

Jane Angha



It was a Wednesday night and I recall my mom hollering up the stairs to my brothers, sisters, and me that it was time to leave. We were heading to church for something new, something for the family.

We closed our school books, rolled off our beds, took a quick look in the mirror, and took our time going down the stairs. My dad and mom were waiting for us, handing us jackets, tugging on messy ponytails, and scooting us out the door. My dad looked a little reluctant walking behind us with my little brother. We walked the two blocks to church — funny no one asked why, we just went along.

It was strange to do this on a Wednesday night; it was when the kids that went to the public school usually went to church for classes. We found our way onto the bleachers in the school gym where just that afternoon, I had practiced my cheers for the green and gold — good ol' Cathedral school! I owned that cheerleader uniform and knew it! I looked around the gym and saw some classmates and neighbors, some of the ushers from church, the old lady who scowled at everyone who did inappropriate things during Mass, and lots of people I didn't know. Oh, and my crush, Jimmy Fitzgibbons, with his silver front tooth gleaming as he grinned at me. He had lost it playing hockey — very cool.

FAMILIES DO GOOD THINGS TOGETHER

Pretty soon our pastor, Monsignor McEneaney, came to the microphone and welcomed everyone. He said we were experimenting — putting all these sworn enemies in one room. That caught my attention. What were sworn enemies? I listened off and on but what I think he said that night was that we were a community, a family. We might be school families, 9:00 a.m. Mass people, Knights of Columbus, but we were a family, and families do good things together.

We sang some songs, watched a skit, and were asked to greet our bleacher neighbors and get to know them. I wished we had sat by the Fitzgibbons, but the lady next to us was pretty cute. She was old, smelled like sugar cookies, and smiled. She told my mom we were great kids and she was a wonderful mother. She asked us all about school and our dog. Overall, it was a nice night. We didn't do this too many more times, but

the times we did made a deep impression in my heart. All of us together learning was kind of cool.

DISINTERESTED AND DISENGAGED

Fast forward many years later — myself a director of faith formation, sitting in my office wondering how to reach our parish families with some good catechesis and a sense of belonging. I felt overwhelmed. So many things would have to happen before that message would sink into the hearts of my families. They were used to dropping their children off and making every excuse for missing the mandatory parent meeting for sacrament preparation. They were lovely, good-hearted people, but they were disinterested and disengaged. Their experience resonated with me. I too was a parent of three children, wondering how I was going to pass on the faith myself without a lot of support and guidance!

We tried different approaches at that parish. We created wonderful Lent and Advent family nights — admittedly, they were mostly crafts, learning about traditions, prayer, and a snack. Not a lot of depth. I knew there had to be something more. I pored over every catalog that came across my desk, hoping each spring or summer that I would find the silver bullet, the magic program that would save me, save my families. It was there in the making, little by little, but one day, a brochure crossed my desk about a new program called *Generations of Faith*; I read the synopsis over and over. I read the requirements needed to become one of the first parishes to be trained to implement it. My pastor read it, reread it, and then said, “I think we should do this. Get everyone on staff on board and it will be a go.” I was so excited I didn't think about the daunting task ahead of me — convincing the staff of 15 that this would be a great thing for us to do. But they listened and said they would go through the training. So, we loaded busses and headed to the training. I remember soaking up every word; it just seemed so right. Our efforts catechizing only children and youth were not doing all the things we thought it would do, or should do, or had done in the past. Parents seemed so disengaged that bringing them into the formation process would be great on so many levels.

We became a *Generations of Faith* parish, and it was hard work. It was not easy to bring the parish along; they told us in the training sessions that would happen. We had to commit to it



and be patient with those who were slow to accept change. Three years in, a pastor and bishop change and this form of catechesis was under the microscope. Was it working? Were we reaching more people than before? Had we lost people? Was it really effective in forming disciples? It was interesting — we had never even asked those questions in regard to traditional faith formation, so the fact that we were discussing the outcomes was pretty amazing. We ended up going back to a traditional model with festivals and family nights interspersed throughout the year. But GOF had changed the game. The expectations of parents and children had shifted; they were looking for ways to learn as families, looking how to bring it home and connect it with their lives.

WHAT DO WE DO AS CHURCH?

Lifelong faith formation isn't a program. It's a truth. We don't have one conversion in our lives — one special moment where we are saved or find Jesus — this is the work of a lifelong journey. We grow and learn the whole of our lives. The church

is part of some of it with gathered programs for learning, liturgy, and worship. Adding one's own life experience and living in the world is another important part of lifelong faith formation. It is turning our hearts toward God, doing what is needed to nurture our relationship with God, our faith community, and those with whom we live, work, and play as well as the world at large. It is knowing that we live in a culture that claims we are independent — self-sufficient and capable of managing what life gives us — but living differently.

Lifelong faith formation also believes that everything we do as church has the potential to teach. I attribute that line to John Roberto, the designer of *Generations of Faith*. That concept has stuck in my mind and heart for all these years, shaping everything I do as a ministry and catechetical leader. It is all you need to know for lifelong faith formation. Let me explain.

Everything we do as church: What does that entail exactly? We preach, teach, celebrate sacraments, socialize as community. We steward our resources, solve problems, serve the poor, and

meet the needs of those who come through the doors of the parish. We help people find, use, and grow in their gifts and talents. We offer experiences where they can meet the God who loves them beyond measure. We play, cook, greet, meet, argue, count money, babysit little ones, tend our lawns and buildings. We baptize, we confirm, we marry, and we send our loved ones off with amazing funeral ritual. We find ways to nurture the soul through music, art, word, discussion, action, and social justice.

There may be a million more things that I missed, but you get the idea. Everything we do — all these amazing and wonderful things — is the church's curriculum. We learn how to be disciples by participating in the life of the church, the parish community. *How* we do these things matters — it brings people to Christ or not.

It matters. It is important. It is our faith.

I encourage you to think back over this past weekend at Mass from the moment you drove into the parking lot and walked through the doors.

- * Was it easy to park?
- * Was there enough signage to let a newcomer know where to park and which door to enter?
- * How is the handicapped parking labeled?
- * Are there other signs that reveal something about the parish?

MESSAGE MATTERS

For instance, at my parish the building and grounds committee was upset that students from the local Catholic high school were using our (empty) lot during the day to park and then walking across a little field to school. The school didn't have enough parking, so the students were creative. Our B&G committee decided to do something about it; they had

signs made that read, "NO PARKING MONDAY – FRIDAY 7am—3pm. VIOLATORS WILL BE FINED AND VEHICLE TOWED." These were meant just for the young people. However, the average person sees the signs too and they are quite unwelcoming!

Once you get to the door, and walk into church, what happens?

- * Are the hallways bright and well lit?
- * Is signage visible?
- * Is there someone wearing a nametag available to welcome and greet or open a door for a young family with baby gear and strollers, or for those with wheelchairs and walkers?
- * Where do you put your coats?
- * Where are the restrooms?
- * Is it okay to grab a bulletin before Mass?

Once you get into the worship space, what happens?

- * Is there a friendly usher to help you find your seat?
- * Is there a way to know how to receive Communion, or what books or worship aid you need to celebrate Mass?
- * Who are the people serving the community that day? The presider, lector, ushers, musicians?
- * Is there anything people might need to know, like the youth are speaking after Mass or there is a second collection for disaster relief?

And what happens during the Mass?

- * Is there a warm welcome and invitation to greet one another, or time to hear a little about the readings and prepare your heart for the celebration.

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- * If there is a baptism, how are that baptismal couple, baby, and Godparents treated on their special day?
- * Do they know how and when to do their parts for the sacrament? Do they know when to come forward and then when to sit?
- * Are they given reserved seating?
- * Are those from out of town welcomed at Mass?
- * And for those not Catholic, is the sacrament or the Mass explained for them in words or a little booklet?

EVERYTHING TEACHES

Each parish ministry must contemplate the statement: Everything we do as church teaches. If we put ourselves in the shoes of a child, teen, newcomer, guest, catechumen, person with a disability, or elder, what would you see, hear, feel, or sense?

Church teaches by the signs we put up, the language we use, the way we invite and welcome new members. We teach by omission just as strongly as when we plan and prepare, choose and decide things.

My parish has a welcoming committee and for the most part, they do a nice job. There are nametags for everyone, greeters at the doors, and ushers trained to make people feel at home. They also have a welcome breakfast once a month for all new parishioners. It is a great idea, but something crucial is often forgotten; newcomers receive a lovely invitation, but when they arrive at the breakfast, no one is assigned to sit with them or help them get to know others. On many occasions, I have seen a new family look like that new kid at school hoping someone will invite them to their lunch table. We quickly ask a family to sit with them and visit, but this should be embedded in their ministry. It isn't enough to gather new parishioners — we must nurture and sustain those new relationships as well.

EVERY MOMENT MATTERS

I was recently at the burial of one of our young adult parishioners who committed suicide. He had been cremated and they were interring the remains on a lovely spring afternoon in May. One of the priests from the parish came to the cemetery for this and looked clearly agitated, like he had better things to do. His foot was tapping, he was standing away from the group gathered, and was looking at his cell phone.

I watched in frustration as I thought that this group was going to learn some things about the church today that are not church at her finest. Grieving suicide is a horrible thing for friends, family, and a community. Those gathered happened to be young adults who most likely had never stepped through the door of a church...yet here they were, hungry for some words, some way to make sense of this, or to make peace. They were uncomfortable. The parents of the young man welcomed the people, explained the ritual, and asked for the group to join them in the prayers. The priest walked up, read the prayers,

closed the book, and walked away. Of course those gathered didn't know they missed out, but I did. They missed out on the love and compassion of Christ — the same love, compassion, and sorrow Jesus showed for the family of his friend Lazarus. The group gathered missed out on the powerful way the church ministers through conversation, the touch of a handshake, a moment of eye to eye human contact.

In studying the research on church attendance and affiliation today, the church can't afford to have too many moments like these. We have so much to offer the world and know what a powerful force our faith can be. We must be attentive to the opportunities we have each day to share faith.

Faith formation is for the whole of our lives. We are never done learning and forever falling short of becoming the person God intends us to be. The church is a human place where the building and grounds committee can mean well, but can unintentionally do more harm than good. Parish priests are human too and can also have a bad day, become frustrated, angry, and agitated. These things happen. The real thing that lifelong formation teaches is humility. We are always learning and growing. We may have to apologize, ask for forgiveness, go out of our way, or step out of our comfortable lives in order to share the good news with others. It often won't be convenient — it will take more of our time than we had thought, or it might mean embarrassment or admitting we were wrong. But Jesus is our model of how to manage these. The Scriptures are full of stories and accounts of his own growing understanding of the love of God throughout his ministry. My favorite is the Syrophenician woman who asked for healing for her daughter (Mk 7:24–30). She understood Jesus' mission to all people before he did himself! Humbled, he healed her daughter.

BECOME AUTHENTIC WITNESSES

The church has a rich curriculum of sacraments, celebrations, catechesis, outreach, and day-to-day living. If we as church do these things well, we will be creating an environment for lifelong learning. The key is being attentive, flexible, and open, and most of all having the conviction that what we do here in our parish in our church is worth it. The transformative love of Christ and the revelation that we are loved beyond measure is contagious when our own hearts are on fire and our lives, our parishes, and our communities reflect that in everything we do and everything we are. Embracing lifelong learning is a beautiful way to be authentic witnesses in the world today. May we accept the challenge to be Christ in the world today as individuals and communities and to inspire, encourage, and equip disciples to make a difference where they are! ■

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Called to be Witnesses in the New Evangelization — Lessons from the Saints

Sara Blauvelt



How does a Catholic live as a disciple in the new evangelization? Does discipleship look markedly different? Such questions arise as Catholics find themselves at a new juncture in the life of the church where traditional modes of passing on the faith — particularly the Catholic milieu that enveloped generations — have largely disappeared. The gathering of bishops, experts, and advisors in Rome for the Synod for the New Evangelization for the Transmission of the Christian Faith addressed such questions with which the church must grapple as it strives to “re-propose the perennial truth of Christ’s Gospel”¹ in a world that is increasingly secular, materialistic, and individualistic.

THE GOOD NEWS OF CHRIST REMAINS UNCHANGED

One fruit of the Synod is a list of 58 propositions that reflect the focus of the three weeks of consultation and discussion. In reading the list of the propositions, one is keenly aware of the all-encompassing vision of the new evangelization, beginning with core content: “The Holy Trinity is the Source of the New Evangelization” (4); to practicalities, “Witnessing in a Secular World” (8) and “Right to Proclaim and Hear the Gospel” (10); to incorporating the social teaching of the church, the “New Evangelization and the Option to the Poor” (31); to the aesthetic “The New Evangelization and the Way of Beauty” (20)². This is no program or policy change; this is a re-visioning of what it means to prepare adults to contribute to the new evangelization. Discipleship in the new evangelization must be rooted in a deep, personal relationship with Jesus that overflows in a life of powerful witness.

The propositions themselves also serve as an important reminder of the distinction made by Blessed John Paul II when he first spoke of the new evangelization. He remarked that the new evangelization is new in its “ardor, method, and expression;”³ the message of the good news of Christ remains

unchanged. The propositions look to the rich heritage of catechesis and evangelization to re-vision how the church will move forward in light of the new evangelization.

The intertwined nature of the propositions cannot be denied; however, two propositions, when isolated, draw attention to catechesis that is both evangelizing and inculturated; such catechesis is attentive to the challenges the gospel faces with respect to modern man and present day culture.

CONVERSION

The first of these two is Proposition 9: “New Evangelization and Initial Proclamation” which calls for attentiveness to preaching the gospel in such a manner that seeks to bring about conversion. This lengthy proposition encompasses the kerygmatic nature of the initial encounter with the gospel, and calls for continuity with catechesis which will move individuals more deeply into the mysteries of faith.

The foundation of all initial proclamation, the kerygmatic dimension, the good news, makes prominent an explicit announcement of salvation. “For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve” (*1 Cor* 15:3-5).

The first proclamation is where the kerygma, the message of salvation of the paschal mystery of Jesus Christ, is proclaimed with great spiritual power to the point of bringing about repentance of sin, conversion of heart, and a decision of faith. At the same time, there has to be continuity between the first proclamation and catechesis, which instructs us in the deposit of the faith.

We consider it necessary that there be a Pastoral Plan of Initial Proclamation, teaching a living encounter with Jesus Christ. This pastoral document would provide the first elements for the catechetical process, enabling its insertion into the lives of the parish communities.

The Synod Fathers proposed that guidelines of the initial proclamation of the kerygma be written to include:

1. Pope Benedict XVI, Homily, June 28, 2012.

2. The entire list of proposals as presented by the Holy See Press Office in the working document: *Synodus Episcoporum Bulletin*, can be found at: http://www.vatican.va/news_services/press/sinodo/documents/bollettino_25_xiii-ordinaria-2012/02_inglese/b33_02.html

3. John Paul II, Address to CELAM (Opening Address of the Nineteenth General Assembly of CELAM, 9 March 1983, Port-au-Prince, Haiti), *L'Osservatore Romano* English Edition 16/780 (18 April 1983), no. 9.

- * Systematic teaching on the kerygma in Scripture and Tradition of the Catholic Church;
- * Teachings and quotations from the missionary saints and martyrs in our Catholic history that would assist us in our pastoral challenges of today; and
- * Qualities and guidelines for the formation of Catholic evangelizers today.

Of particular interest is the importance given to the teachings of the missionary saints as models of kerygmatic proclamation. All in the church today are “called by God so that they, led by the spirit of the Gospel, might contribute to the sanctification of the world, as from within like leaven, by fulfilling their own particular duties.”⁴ The Synod Fathers remind us, as did the author of the Letter to the Hebrews, that we have before us a “great cloud of witnesses.”⁵ It is the witness of the saints, of the church, those men and women who have assimilated the qualities of kerygma, inculturation and personal holiness, who provide an ideal model for men and women today who seek to live out their Baptismal call to “go and make disciples.”⁶

INCULTURATION

Proposition 5: “The New Evangelization and Inculturation” builds upon Proposition 9. Here, the Synod Fathers present both a personal call to holiness and a missionary heart to make an “actual effort” to share the faith on the part of every member of the church:

Jesus offers the gift of the Holy Spirit and reveals to us the love of the Father. The New Evangelization is a time of awakening, of new encouragement and new witness that Jesus Christ is the center of our faith and daily life. It calls on every member of the Church to a renewal of faith and an actual effort to share it. It also requires discerning the signs of the times in the world that impacts the ministry of the Church and in the different particular Churches in their proper territories. Among these signs one needs to recognize certainly a growing awareness of people to the changing circumstances of life today.

Furthermore it calls the Church to reach out to those who are far from God and the Christian community to invite them to once again hear the word of God in order to encounter the Lord Jesus in a new and profound way.⁷

For the modern mind, this proposition may seem to offer a new vision and scope of discipleship; in reality, it provides the paradigm for how to live life as a devout follower of Christ as

ancient as the church. Evangelization is the responsibility and the very vocation of the church — a truth reiterated by Pope Paul VI in his apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, when he said, “She exists in order to evangelize, that is to say, in order to preach and teach, to be the channel of the gift of grace, to reconcile sinners with God, and to perpetuate Christ’s sacrifice in the Mass, which is the memorial of His death and glorious resurrection.”⁸

Catholicism, steeped in stories, pre-eminently the story of salvation, also treasures the lives of saints, the stories of martyrs and missionaries who lived and died for Christ. This storytelling is not merely an exercise in re-telling tales of the past, but also a means of sparking the imagination, opening the mind to new possibilities and outcomes. For the Christian people, the cult of saints presents individuals whose lives portray religious truths which transcend time and culture, and as such, they have served as a source of inspiration since the earliest of the church.

In his collection of essays, *The Common Man*, G.K. Chesterton writes, “The first use of good literature is that it prevents a man from being merely modern.”⁹ The notion of modernity to have the newest “model” is not particularly helpful in hagiography; it is the enduring value of the text, particularly the life lived as an imitator of Christ that allows it to be unceasingly new. Chesterton goes on, “Literature, classic and enduring literature, does its best work in reminding us perpetually of the whole round of truth and balancing other and older ideas against the ideas to which we might for a moment be prone.”¹⁰ The Synod Fathers drew from this insight in Proposition 9 when they called Catholic evangelizers today to include in a compendium for the initial proclamation of the kerygma, the “teachings and quotations from the missionary saints and martyrs in our Catholic history that would assist us in our pastoral challenges of today.”

Many of the notable saints of North America — St. Frances Xavier Cabrini, St. Isaac Jogues, St. Rose Philippine Duchesne, St. John Neumann, St. Katharine Drexel, St. Mother Théodore Guérin, St. Damien of Molokai, and Blessed Junípero Serra — reflect paths of holiness that are at the same time both very human and very extraordinary. Their lives are not marked by radical asceticism, distancing them from culture. Rather, theirs were lives that engaged the world and sought to transform it from within. Many came to America as missionaries; others born in America were moved by a deep personal faith to share the gospel with those whom they lived among but who were culturally different. Some of these saintly men and women were martyrs; just as many lived long lives in service to the Lord and all his people. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* points out that the saints lived lives of heroic virtue and

4. Vatican Council II, “*Gaudium et Spes*,” 37.

5. Heb 12:1.

6. Mt 28:19.

7. *Synodus Episcoporum Bulletin*, http://www.vatican.va/news_services/press/sinodo/documents/bollettino_25_xiii-ordinaria-2012/02_inglese/b33_02.html, #5.

8. Paul, VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 14.

9. G.K. Chesterton, *The Common Man* (New York : Sheed & Ward, 1950), 22.

10. *Ibid*, 22.



Photo by Mike King

distinguishes them as sources and models of renewal for the church.¹¹ In these men and women the theological virtues of faith, hope, and love were lived in an exemplary way. Through the contemplation of God, both St. Elizabeth Seton and St. Katherine Drexel were moved to great acts. Mother Seton was acutely aware of the need for contemplation (of God) in her life of saintly service: “He is my guide, my friend, and supporter — with such a guide can I fear, with such a friend shall I not be satisfied, with such a supporter can I fall?”¹² Of Mother Drexel it was observed: “The driving power of Mother Katharine Drexel was her love for the Blessed Sacrament. It formed her inner life of prayer which made possible her outer life of continuous service.”¹³ Their lives manifest real vitality; St. Rose Philippine Duchesne, who lived and worked among the Potawatomie Indians, was known by the Native name “Woman Who Prays Always.” Wherever these saints went, the people to whom they proposed the gospel were moved as much by their actions, as by their words.

The early martyrs of the church were persecuted not so much because they worshipped Christ, but because they refused to worship the gods of the prevailing culture. This confluence of faith and life leads to the importance of inculturation. By its very nature, inculturation is attentive to the three-fold nature of the new evangelization and its focus in serving, not dominating, individuals *and* entire cultures, through life-long

evangelization of those who have never heard the gospel before, those who have heard and fallen away (re-evangelization) and finally those who have heard and seek ongoing conversion.¹⁴ Pope John Paul II elucidated, “Conversion is a goal which is never fully attained: on the path which the disciple is called to follow in the footsteps of Jesus, conversion is a lifelong task.”¹⁵ Conversion of heart has implications that reach far beyond the traditional notion of evangelization which brings the gospel to foreign lands. This is a radical understanding of evangelization: evangelization for everyone, by everyone, *and* as a life-long transformative process.

SAINTLY EXAMPLES

St. Paul leads the way in the art of inculturation when at the Areopagus he proclaimed, “You Athenians, I see that in every respect you are very religious. For as I walked around looking carefully at your shrines, I even discovered an altar inscribed, ‘To an Unknown God.’ What therefore you unknowingly worship, I proclaim to you.”¹⁶ St. Paul reminded the Athenians that despite their worship of an “Unknown God,” there was an inherently social character to religious beliefs and behaviors that bind that culture together. As such, inculturation calls not for a blind acceptance or rejection of the world and/or a culture’s religious practices; rather, inculturation requires giving

11. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 828.

12. Joseph I. Dirvin, Archives of St. Joseph’s Provincial House, III, ii.

13. Katherine Burton, *The Golden Door: The Life of Katharine Drexel*, (New York, NY: P.J. Kennedy & Sons, 1957), 309.

14. The differentiation of the three-fold nature of evangelization is outlined in *Redemptoris Missio*, 33.

15. Pope John Paul II, *Ecclesia in America*, (January 22, 1999) 28.http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jpii_exh_22011999_ecclesia-in-america_en.html (accessed March 12, 2009).

16. Acts 17:22-23.

value to what is positive in any given culture and purifying what is not. Inculturation of the gospel calls for purifying elements of a culture that keep persons from living to their full dignity as persons made in the image and likeness of God as revealed in Christ. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* describes the process or inculturation quite poetically when it says:

By her very mission, the Church...travels the same journey as all humanity and shares the same earthly lot with the world: she is to be a leaven and, as it were, the soul of human society in its renewal by Christ and transformation into the family of God. Missionary endeavor requires *patience*. It begins with the proclamation of the Gospel to peoples and groups who do not yet believe in Christ, continues with the establishment of Christian communities that are a sign of God's presence in the world, and leads to the foundation of local churches. It must involve a process of inculturation if the Gospel is to take flesh in each people's culture. There will be times of defeat. With regard to individuals, groups, and peoples it is only by degrees that [the church] touches and penetrates them, and so receives them into a fullness which is Catholic.¹⁷

Aside from St. Paul, many missionary saints have been practitioners of inculturation. Among the earliest are Sts. Cyril and Methodius and Patrick, all of whom introduced the gospel into the culture to transform and give life to, not to destroy, the existing culture. The success of these great saints is well documented as is the prayer and preparation that inspired their mission.

Such transformative work requires preparation. Blessed John Paul II lauded the Slavic saints Cyril and Methodius as missionaries of inculturation: "They had in fact prepared well for the task entrusted to them: they took with them the texts of the Sacred Scriptures needed for celebrating the Sacred Liturgy, which they had prepared and translated into the Old Slavonic language and written in a new alphabet, devised by Constantine the Philosopher and perfectly adapted to the sounds of that language."¹⁸ By their conscientious translation of the Slavic language, these two saints modeled hospitality and welcome by making the liturgy and Sacred Scripture more readily accessible to the native people. Through their efforts, the gospel was incarnated in the culture. Furthermore, the contribution of an alphabet for the Slavonic language enriched the culture and literature of all the Slav nations.

St. Patrick, whose life has taken on such legendary status, is often deprived of its transformative power. His feast day has become a celebration disconnected from Patrick's great love for Christ and the people of Ireland. However, the missionary

activity of this good and holy man came through providential preparation, in part, from his years of prayer when he was living a life of slavery in the service of cruel master in Ireland. Despite such circumstances, or perhaps because of them, Patrick felt the love of God and drew more deeply into this relationship through prayer. Ultimately, led by an angel to freedom and return to his homeland, Patrick found himself called to the service of *God* in the *sacred ministry* of the priesthood in the country of his imprisonment. His widespread renowned learning came to the fore, but it was his life of virtue and love for the people of Ireland that allowed him to transform pagan rituals through the power of paschal mystery and thus bring about the conversion of a nation. Showing a sensibility of "new evangelization," Patrick as bishop continued to meet the needs of the faithful, wherever they were in their encounter with Christ, as he strengthened them in knowledge of the *faith*, instructing chieftains alongside their tribes, modeling lived practice of *virtue*, comforting the *faithful* in their difficulties and helped organizing parishes and appointing priests to carry on the mission to "Go therefore and make disciples." His trajectory from prayer, to study, to gospel truths well lived and shared with others transformed a nation. These three men are just three examples of saints who were "pioneers in territory."¹⁹

The author of the "Letter to the Hebrews" exhorts the community to actively engage in hagiographical activity (while not labeling it as such): "Remember your leaders who spoke the word of God to you. Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever."²⁰ The wisdom of these propositions calls the Catholic evangelizer today to remain attentive to the reality that he or she is "surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses"²¹ and should "rid ourselves of every burden and sin that clings to us and persevere in running the race that lies before us while keeping our eyes fixed on Jesus, the leader and perfecter of faith."²² Drawing on the strength and beauty of these lives of witness, we can become more attentive to the needs of those around us and see the countless opportunities for conversion and the growth of faith. This is not a new insight, but one which we need to keep at the forefront of evangelizing efforts. Pope Paul VI affirmed this when he said, "Modern man listens more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if he does listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses."²³

It is essential that the disciple today who seeks to transform persons and cultures recalls that it is Christ and the paschal mystery that animated all that the saints did. In his book,

17. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 854.

18. Pope John Paul II, *Slavorum Apostoli*, 5.

19. *Ibid.*, 21.

20. Heb 13:7-8.

21. Heb 12:1

22. Heb 12:2

23. Pope Paul VI, *Address to the Members of the Consilium de Laicis* (2 October 1974): *AAS* 66 (1974), p. 568.

The Meaning of Saints, Lawrence Cunningham calls attention to the genre of hagiography and admonishes, “Over the centuries, the genre devolved and became overly steeped in legend; as a result, it lost much of its transformative power and became a source of piety not necessarily rooted in Christ.” Cunningham says of this shift, “Inevitably, fact, fiction, pious elaborations, and folklore became part and parcel of this literary tradition.”²⁴ The focus of the story no longer spoke of the life of the saint as *imitator Christi*, but to the miraculous and the spectacular, or was written merely to serve the cause of canonization of the individual. The Catholic evangelizer today is well-served to recall that, first and foremost, a deep, abiding relationship with Jesus Christ must be at the heart of all efforts to share the truth of God in love.

UNIVERSAL CALL TO HOLINESS

Pope Leo XIII, in his encyclical *Grande Munus* (1880), lauding Sts. Cyril and Methodius, begins by recalling the commission to “go and make disciples of all nations”²⁵ when he says, “The great duty of spreading the Christian name was entrusted in a special way to Peter, the head of the apostles, and to his successors. It urges the popes to send messengers of the Gospel to the various peoples of the earth, as the affairs of the merciful God demand.”²⁶ The Second Vatican Council reaffirmed the dignity of the all the baptized and their commission to be evangelizers of the gospel in the world. Blessed John Paul II in his encyclical on the *Slavorum Apostoli*, on the 100th anniversary of *Grande Munus*, speaks the vision of the Council calling all to their missionary role: “All individuals, all nations, cultures and civilizations have their own part to play and their own place in God’s mysterious plan and in the universal history of salvation.”²⁷

This universal call to holiness imbues all the baptized with a unique opportunity to bring the gospel to their particular place in the world: whether it be in family, work, or community, the lay faithful have a privileged opportunity to transform the culture from within. The Second Vatican Council Decree, *Ad Gentes* (On the Mission of the Church) states the following:

In order that they may be able to bear more fruitful witness to Christ, let them be joined to those men by esteem and love; let them acknowledge themselves to be members of the group of men among whom they live; let them share in cultural and social life by the various undertakings and enterprises of human living; let them be familiar with their national and religious traditions; let them gladly and reverently lay bare the seeds of the Word which lie hidden among their fellows. At the same time, however, let them look to the profound changes which are taking

place among nations, and let them exert themselves to keep modern man, intent as he is on the science and technology of today’s world from becoming a stranger to things divine; rather, let them awaken in him a yearning for that truth and charity which God has revealed.²⁸

All efforts to share the faith must be rooted in a deep personal relationship with Jesus Christ on the part of the evangelizer, presenting the truths of the faith articulated in the creed, specifically the Trinity. At the same time, the evangelizer must read the “signs of the times” so the he or she can make intelligible the gospel to each generation and speak to the perennial questions of life in such a manner that they take root in individuals and cultures.²⁹

A German missionary monk and martyr, St. Boniface was known for his excellence as a teacher. At the same time, he had a great missionary zeal; therefore, Pope Gregory II sent Boniface to go preach the word to pagan people in Northern and Central Europe. Having little trouble with dialects, which resembled his own native Anglo-Saxon, Boniface proved himself to be an effective missionary. Pope Pius XII points to the strength that served to undergird his missionary zeal: “Without a doubt he drew it from divine grace, which he ever sought in humble, persevering and fervent prayer. So strongly was he driven by love of God that his one aim was an ever closer union with Him, an ever lengthier converse with Him; his prime purpose was to preach God’s glory to unknown tribes, and to bring them to Him in reverence and love. He could surely repeat with every right that phrase of St. Paul’s: ‘With us, Christ’s love is a compelling motive.’”³⁰

One great beauty that comes from this holistic stance toward evangelization modeled by the saints is that the evangelizers themselves are evangelized. Moved by such a compelling motive — Christ’s love — the Catholic evangelizer today can be a model of inculturation, introducing the beauty and riches of the gospel into all cultures and bringing these cultures into the life of the church, while growing ever more deeply in relationship and knowledge of Christ him/herself. Evangelization may take the form of being the first to proclaim the gospel; however, evangelization more often takes the form of kindling anew an awareness of Jesus. United with Christ and moved by the Holy Spirit, disciples as witnesses are able to be flexible in ardor, method, and expression in the sharing of our faith, while maintaining the gospel truths that alone can truly transform humanity. ■

Sara Blauvelt is the director for catechesis for the Archdiocese of Washington.

24. Cunningham, “Saints” in *The New Dictionary of Theology*, 926.

25. Mt 28:19

26. Pope Leo XIII, *Grande Munus*, 1.

27. Pope John Paul II, *Slavorum Apostoli*, 19.

28. Vatican Council II, *Ad Gentes*, 11.

29. cf. *Gaudium et Spes*, 4

30. Pope Pius XII, *Ecclesia Fastos*, 27.

Rural Catechesis

Donald R. Kurre



I'm finding it difficult to write about rural catechesis in general terms. In *Religious Education in the Small Member Church*, Nancy Foltz describes a basic principle to keep in mind: a program of catechesis must be worked out in each particular parish, taking into account the character and needs of its

members, the place of the parish in the community, its relationship to other institutions in the community, its traditions and heritage, and its resources and opportunities (83).

PLACE MATTERS

One of the best practices of rural catechesis is to understand that place matters. My experience of rural includes wide, open spaces and great distance with few people. I once joked that on a trip to Chadron, Nebraska, just 228 miles, "I saw more cattle than people."

An urban center is where people go for work or after work to shop. Driving is nothing new because it is required of life. When I was hired, Bishop McNamara warned me, "Distance isn't a problem; it is a reality." As a result, I have an extensive collection of cassette tapes, CDs, and podcasts that I listen to as I travel throughout the diocese. Our diocese is made up of 46,000 square miles in western Nebraska. Grand Island, the Diocesan See and largest city in the diocese, sits in the southeastern-most corner of the diocese making the travel time from Grand Island to the parish in the northwest corner an eight-hour drive.

Most of Nebraska is prairie; more than two-thirds of the state lies within the Great Plains proper. The elevation slopes upward gradually from east to west, from a low of 840 feet (256 m) in the southeast to 5,424 feet (1,654 m) in Kimball County. Rolling, alluvial lowlands in the eastern portion of the state give way to the flat, treeless plain of central Nebraska, which in turn rises to a tableland in the west. The Sand Hills of the north-central plain is an unusual region of sand dunes anchored by grasses that cover about 18,000 square miles (47,000 sq km).

Consolidating parishes and schools faces many of the rural communities. Bishop Dendinger, current bishop of Grand Island, no longer has the option of consolidating parishes

since further consolidations would require parishioners to drive over 60 miles to get to catechetical programs or Mass. Several of our pastors already drive a total of 100 miles to celebrate Mass in their rural parishes on any given Sunday.

I asked our rural catechetical leaders to share their thoughts about rural catechesis. I asked three questions: "What would you name as a best practice in rural catechetical ministry?" "What model of catechetical ministry have you found most effective?" and "What advice would you give about rural catechetical ministry?" In response to those questions, a summary of their answers provides some insight to rural catechetical ministry.

BEST PRACTICES

When asked about best practices one catechist responded, "I find that works best to just be open every week when I come to class. We live in a community where everyone knows everyone and the kids connect with each other in nearly every aspect of their lives including school, community, and church. For this reason, lesson plans often take a different turn than what I had in mind when I planned the class. As long as I can somehow relate to the discussion, I am flexible."

Another leader said, "Get the family as a whole involved in the religious education of their youth; it's important that they get involved at all levels of their religious education, not just during times of sacrament."

Catechetical leaders find that it is key to get all parishioners involved in the religious education program. Getting the elderly and those who haven't had children yet involved in the program helps the parish feel more like a united community or family.

MODELS OF CATECHESIS

Leaders find that the best way to get the program going and keep it moving forward is the personal approach to getting parishioners involved. People are willing and want to help, but no one has ever asked. And, for whatever reason, they are too reserved to speak up and offer. I have found that when I have personally invited people to join our program or to help with an activity, those people have been more generous with their time and money in future activities.



Figure 1 Canyons in the Sand Hills of Nebraska. Used with permission of Mike Lehmkuhler

In line with the new evangelization one catechetical leader said, “I think it is important to pick up the phone and call those parishioners who have fallen away from the church for one reason or another. Some will decline your offer to join them, but others will be grateful that you called.”

“We use the common model of weekly classes throughout the academic year,” said one DRE.

Continuing, she said, “We have tried Sunday morning classes but currently have class on Wednesday afternoons for younger kids, and Wednesday evening for the junior high and high school kids. I have found that attendance is much more consistent on Wednesdays. This evening is deemed church night in our area and the schools rarely schedule events and activities on those evenings. Nearly all of our rural communities respect Wednesdays and church night and limit school activities including sports. Our catechetical leaders maintain positive relationships with the schools and let them know when a coach or teacher pressures the students on Wednesdays.”

ADVICE FROM CATECHETICAL LEADERS

Utilize all of your resources and reach out to other catechists. A DRE reported that, “Our diocese does a wonderful job of providing us with many opportunities to meet and get to know other catechists from communities within our diocese. These ‘co-workers’ can have fresh ideas, helpful advice, or just be friendly moral support.”

Another leader said, “People can be scared of change, but it’s okay to try something different. Chances are it will be welcomed and encouraged. Not everything will work and that is okay. Learn from your mistakes...Do your best and forget the rest. Treasure your catechist. They dedicate a lot of their time to the program, and they should not be taken for granted.”

One leader said, “Working in a rural community is one of the most rewarding places to be. The people are friendly and always willing to help others in need. It is like having an extended family.”



Figure 2 Pivot line Travel in Rural Nebraska.
Used with permission of Sylvia Thornton

Another minister said, “One of the aspects I like best about catechetical ministry in a rural parish is the involvement and support by the entire faith community for events, activities, and celebrations. For example, many parish members come for the annual Christmas play put on by the elementary children, the entire church basement fills for a fundraiser breakfast for the kids going to National Catholic Youth

Conference, and sacraments are made special and memorable because it is a whole parish affair.

What do rural parishes bring to the table? They bring the willingness to cross “perceived” boundaries. The catechetical programs in rural parishes thrive when leaders nurture their programs on strengths found in most rural communities. Those characteristics are a small number of students and parishioners living as a primary group that has a strong sense of local Catholic identity (community) with a willingness to support one another and exhibit a strong “do it yourself” (DIY) attitude and practice.

We’ve always been DIY communities. Most rural catechetical programs are working to mirror traditional graded programs. When there are not enough students we combine classes, which are really learning groups; we adopt the text written for the second grade and use them for two years with first and second graders.

TECHNOLOGY

Of all the environments, rural or small member communities have the most to gain from the technological age. With some work, effort, and planning rural or small member parishes have significant catechetical opportunities.

The fact that you only have ten students K-12 is no longer the constraint it once was. With the use of the Internet, we now have access to as many students as we need.

I understand the challenge that this age presents to rural communities; we’re convinced or have been convinced that grade level religious formation programs are necessary — the Holy Grail for effective formation.

CATECHETICAL LEADER

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We are being called, in the new evangelization, to let go of our preconceived understandings of good or ideal religious education programs. Once faced with a lack of local resources, small member parishes no longer have that constraint. For example, while we may not have access to a local library, we have access to the Vatican Library.

We must let go of our notion that because of our size and perceived “ruralness,” or isolation, we lack some things large urban parishes have. We need to change our perception.

Recently when touring a feedlot, our guide told us that the feed they use is prepared based on the need of the cattle they are feeding. They track weight gain, health, and the like of each head over a computer system that monitors the herd.

A friend gave us a ride in his tractor as he planted their corn crop. The corn is planted with the aid of GPS. Planting once done by sight and feel is now automated. The farmer is almost just along for the ride. The crop is planted, irrigated, and digitally monitored with the proper amount of water and chemicals needed all from the comfort of the farm house or local coffee shop.

It is not my intention to paint a picture of rural agriculture that is totally automated because that would not be accurate. From what I’ve learned, agriculture is as much art as it is science. The point I want to make is that the tools that are changing agriculture from ranches to farms are in rural areas. We have access. We are using these tools. I’ve heard some argue, “We don’t have Internet and we don’t have cell service.” Why not? Check the National Broadband Map and find out what is available in your area. Parishes are starting Internet cafes in their basements and also using the abundant mobile tools their students access.

A best practice for rural catechesis is to accept the rural experience of this place for what it is and play to its strengths. Paraphrasing Foltz again, formality, rigidity, and heavy structure grate against the grain of the rural parish. Catechetical programs need a simplicity, clarity, and unity of design that maintains the focus on persons and relationships. Best practices for rural catechesis flow from fitting our ministry to the flow of the parish’s life together, develop lay ownership and leadership, honor the character of the primary group, and break the bond of generic large-scale educational design (90-91).

With that focus we are able to effectively share the light of faith. “And you realize, that from this point, you can see eternity.”

Here are some resources that you might find helpful in growing your ministry in a rural environment.

* Foltz, Nancy, Ed.; *Religious Education in the Small Membership Church*, Religious Education Press, Birmingham, Alabama, 1990.

* *National Catholic Rural Life Conference*: <http://www.ncrlc.com/>

* National Broadband Map: <http://www.broadband-map.gov/technology>

* *National Directory for Catechesis: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2005* |

Donald R. Kurre is the director of religious education for the Diocese of Grand Island.

THE HILLS

A city dweller lost his way and drove into my ranch,
I gave him his directions, then we visited, by chance.
He asked, “What is there here that makes you want to stay?”
I asked him how much time he had for what I had to say.

I said, “Stranger look to those hills and tell me what you see.”
“I see desolation and barrenness and death,” he said to me.
“I see loneliness and emptiness and a void in civilization,
Hard to believe this exists in the midst of this great nation.”

He said, “I am intrigued, at why you chose this place,
To live so far removed from the realm of the human race.
But there must be some great reason devoid of all the frills,
Tell me what you see, when you look into those hills?”

I sought carefully for answers, for I had never questioned why,
I had picked this place in all the world, where I would live and die.
I see solitude, not loneliness, I see cleanliness and rain,
I see life as I live it, I see joy and I see pain.

I see truth and beauty, I see nature, I see death,
In this big land where man is free, with room to take a breath.
I hear the cry of the red-tailed hawk and the coyote’s lonely voice,
And I realize that they, like me, are here by their own choice.

I move across this native grass few men have ever trod,
And live amongst these hills traversed by me and God.
“This is not a stage, but the stage, not actors, but players,” I said,
“Where life is real and folks know joy, but also have suffered and bled.”

“There are sunrises with promises of a beautiful new day,
And stars so close at night that you can touch the milky way.
All the worlds great problems lie here at your feet,
But everything man’s searching for, is here within your reach.”

“And you realize, that from this point, you can see eternity,
And know you’ve found a place where man’s most nearly free!” |

(Jack Ostergard, used with permission)

Here's the Church, Where Are the People?

Lois DeFelice



As a child, many of us played the game, folding our hands to make the church and steeple, opening the doors, and seeing all the people. At some point, we discovered that if you folded your fingers on top, when you opened the door, the people were missing.

In a recent issue of *Catechetical Leader*, Janet Crespi spoke about all the things we are doing right inside the doors, yet the people are not there. She proposed a radical change in our methods of catechizing. Following the Second Vatican Council a number of books graced the shelves of the evolving ministry of catechetical leader. As this article on the “new evangelization” began to develop, one title kept surfacing: *Hope for the Flowers* by Trina Paulus. Paulus’s intent in writing this book was to assist a friend during a difficult time. The church today could be a beacon of hope for people facing difficulty during these challenging times.

The mission of the church has remained the same since the Great Commission: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations” (Mt 28:19). So, we have been about evangelization from the start. Jesus told us that he came to show the path to life; this is what evangelization is about. The Second Vatican Council Fathers warned about the separation between faith and life. There are many church documents giving us background for the “new evangelization,” a phrase coined by Pope Paul VI in *Evangelization in the Modern World*. He was speaking about how the church could respond to the challenges created by the contemporary world. In *Mission of the Redeemer*, Pope John Paul II saw the great need to relaunch evangelization in the present life of the church. He emphasized the need for a personal relationship with Jesus, Lord and Savior. The *National Directory of Catechesis* states: “Jesus Christ is the energizing center of evangelization and the heart of catechesis” (4).

Catechesis is a remarkable moment of evangelization. This means we, as catechists, need to be firmly rooted in our understanding of the gospel and its message. We know as catechists that the message of the gospel must be heard, understood, embraced, lived, and shared. This is part of our baptismal call. The “new evangelization” calls all to live out this vocation through sacrificial service to the world. Pope Francis shows us through his service how to bring the gospel to a materialistic, spiritually deficient world.

In our catechetical programs we need to make the gospel message a priority for formation of catechetical leaders, catechists, and learners whether adult, young adult, teen, or children. We need to include time in each session to reflect on the weekly Scriptures, breaking open the word, and then seeking a way to act on that word in our life. Statistics are telling us that if we don’t keep the young people between the ages of 13 and 24, they will be gone for good once they leave. The statistics also indicate that in families where the parent has faith and follows that commitment, their children are more likely to do so. Our catechetical programs need to address the families and help them see the connection between faith and life, and give them the tools to live in a world that no longer shares the same values.

In June of 2010, Pope Benedict XVI announced the establishment of a new Pontifical Council for New Evangelization. The contemporary culture has thrown off almost all Christian influence. We are surrounded by secularism, materialism, anti-life preoccupation, technology without conscience, and an economic crisis. Many Catholics do not know what the Catholic Church actually teaches and often pick and choose what parts they will agree with and practice. Many Catholics profess the creed at weekly liturgy but confine its practice and understanding to just that hour. With the recent implementation of the Third Edition of the Roman Missal, catechists continue to have an opportunity to increase the faithful’s understanding of the liturgy, its transformative power, and to emphasize the sending to the world at the dismissal rite.

There are many other opportunities to evangelize and assist those who have heard the gospel message but have forgotten how to live it. There are opportunities to catechize and evangelize at sacramental moments in our church.

- * Are our meetings around the sacraments only about the time, the place, the dress, and what is “required” to receive a particular sacrament at this parish?
- * Do we take these moments to journey with people where they are on their faith journey?
- * At marriage and baptism prep, we have an opportunity to assist families in seeing that faith connection between their lives and what they are asking of the church.
- * At reconciliation meetings, there is an opportunity to reconnect the adults with the practice of confession.

- * Often we have parents who are bringing children to experience the sacrament and they have not been to confession for years. How do we encourage and invite the adults back to practicing their faith?
- * At the end of parent meetings, take the time to invite those who have anything that might be preventing them from full participation in the sacrament that they are bringing their child to, for example marriage/annulment issues or perhaps the parent has not been fully initiated or is of another faith.

These moments are times to invite people to a fuller and deeper relationship with Jesus Christ.

Since the Second Vatican Council, the teaching of the Catholic Church has been consistent concerning the missionary activity of the church. The church by its very nature is missionary and every baptized Christian participates in that missionary activity. Pope Benedict XVI said, “All the sectors of pastoral life, of catechesis and of charity should be characterized by the missionary dimension: The Church is mission.”

Evangelization requires a living faith which plants within a person the desire to share that faith with others. We need to

recapture a Catholic culture, present it in an engaging and imaginative way. Pope Benedict XVI told us, “the goal of all our pastoral and catechetical work, the object of our preaching, and the focus of our sacramental ministry should be to help people establish and nurture that living relationship with ‘Christ Jesus, our hope’” (1 Tim 1:1).

The challenge for catechesis today is to be willing to take risks and venture into new ways of transmitting this message of hope to those whom we encounter on this journey. We, as catechists, are the “hope for the flowers,” those whom we are sowing the seeds of faith in today and maybe through our efforts, we can find the people back “in the church.”

Lois DeFelice currently works in the Archdiocese of Chicago Office for Catechesis and Youth Ministry. She is the Vicariate VI Catechetical Ministry Coordinator and Coordinator for Black Catechesis. She has worked in parish ministry as a catechetical leader and liturgist for over 40 years.



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Evolution of the Word: The New Testament in the Order the Books Were Written

By Marcus Borg | Reviewed by Dan Thomas



There are several ways that one could read the New Testament. One could start at the Gospel of Matthew, read the Acts of the Apostles, the letters of Paul and the additional letters, and close with Revelation. Or one could bring all of the purported letters of Paul, the letters of James, Peter, John and

Jude, the gospels and Acts, and finally Revelation with the idea that these are chronological. Or one could do what Marcus Borg, the canon theologian at Trinity Episcopal Cathedral in Portland, Oregon, and Professor emeritus at Oregon State University, does in this book: begin with 1 Thessalonians and end with Second Peter, following what most contemporary scripture scholars consider to be the actual order in which the New Testament was written.

A NEED FOR STRUCTURES

What happens when one does this is that the reader follows the developments of New Testament thought and history as they came to be in the context of the time and place in which they occurred. You learn, for example, that Paul and the early church had the expectation that Jesus was coming again soon, thus there was an urgency about preaching about him. When the realization came that this second coming was delayed, there was a need to develop structures and teachings to persevere what was received.

Borg briefly describes the chronological order this way:

This chronological New Testament does not begin with the gospels but with seven of Paul's letters. Moreover, the gospels appear in a different order: Mark is first, not Matthew. It does not end with Revelation, but with several documents written later than Revelation. (3)

What is the value of reading the New Testament is this way? First, we see the Pauline communities struggling with the issues of growing in their Christian understanding. Secondly, we see the gospels coming out of the Christian communities answering their particular issues; the understanding of who Jesus was developed as the church grew. Finally, we see the response of the church of the 90s and early second century, CE, to the questions and difficulties that contact with Hellenistic culture brought.

Each New Testament book is introduced by its context, which Borg describes as three-fold: Jesus and early Christianity, Judaism, and the Roman Empire. His

presentation of the Roman Empire as politically oppressive, economically exploitative, chronically violent, and legitimated by religious claims is a description that could be applied to some of the structures of our present capitalistic system.

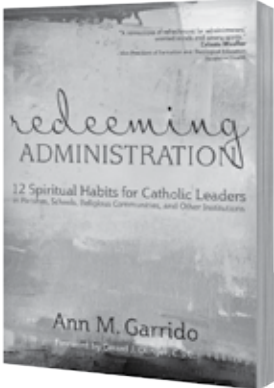
His chapter, "Before Anything Was Written," powerfully captures the dynamism of the early Christian communities. The early Christians had a present memory of Jesus, but

in addition...experienced him after his death as a living figure of the present, not simply as a remembered and dearly beloved figure from the past. Moreover, they did not experience him as a ghostly survivor, but in a radically new way as a divine reality now one with God. (16)

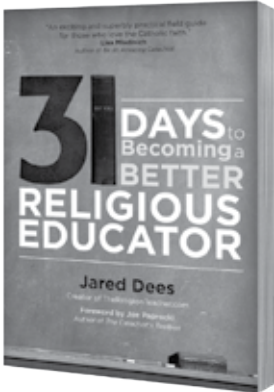
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This, of course, can be our experience of Jesus as well.

In describing Paul's Christian communities, Borg makes several intriguing points:

- * "they were groups learning about and practicing a comprehensive way of life"
- * "ekklesia...means 'assembly' and 'those called out'—a community, not a parish with a building"
- * "Paul's communities were small...as small as fifteen or twenty people and perhaps as large as a hundred or two (as in Corinth)" (27-28)

The order of the books according to Borg is as follows: the seven authentic letters of Paul (1 Th., Galatians, 1 Cor., Philemon, Philippians, 2 Cor., Romans), Mark, James, Colossians, Matthew, Hebrews, John, Ephesians, Revelation, Jude, 1-3 John, Luke, Acts, 2 Th., 1 Peter, 1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, Titus, 2 Peter.

KEY ISSUES OF THE TIME

Each book is introduced in its historical context, some of its themes given, its dating and authorship discussed, and where necessary, the scholarly background presented. It is

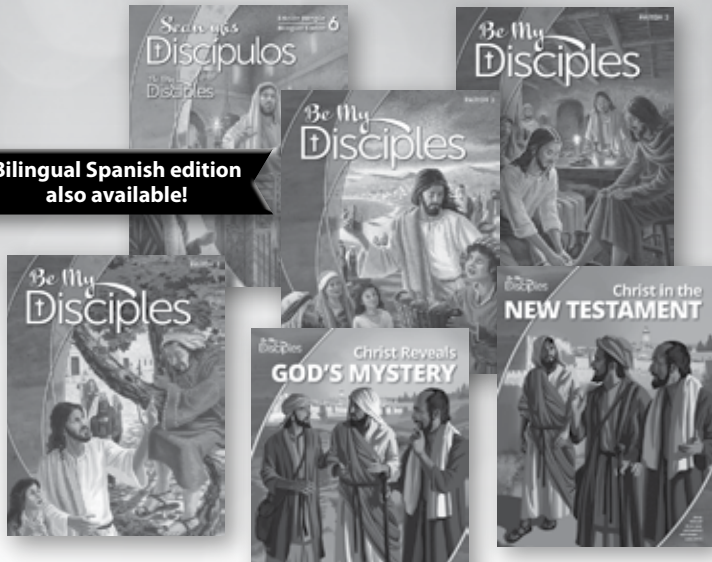
an intriguing and enlightening way to experience the New Testament. The reader is given a sense of the key issues of the time and how they impacted the way the authors wrote. One sees Christian thought, teaching, and practice change to meet new challenges and questions. Structures and practices come out of the experiences of these communities in response to events within and without. One sees the essentials of being a Christian sorted out in response to the need to be faithful to the tradition received from the Lord.

I have been reading this book with a book discussion group that has been meeting for nearly 25 years. We have discovered a number of new ideas and confirmed some old ones. Many interesting issues have been raised as well as an appreciation and understanding of the experience of being church that those early communities encountered and grew up in. This is certainly relevant to our experience of Christian community as it happens in today's world. |

Daniel Thomas was a director of religious education for 30 years in four different parishes in the Dayton area of the Cincinnati Archdiocese. He retired in 2010. He has been married to Eileen for 35 years, and they have two adult sons. Contact him at danlthomas@sbcglobal.net.

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God's Facebook

Claire M. McManus



Even in a world enmeshed in social networks, there remain skeptics that deny the value of online interaction. We still have dioceses that decry social media as dubious and dangerous, continuing to forbid their agencies from using this as a platform for communication. Parishes still exist that have no Wi-Fi, and some that don't provide computers for their catechetical ministries. Suggesting that social media become a resource for ministry is like asking these parishes to erect the Hubble telescope to view the moon.

FACEBOOK: A VEHICLE FOR GRACE?

Yet, research tells us that social media, especially Facebook, has become de rigueur for the 80 percent of American adults who use the Internet. In fact, Facebook is no longer the exclusive cyber-hangout of college kids and hip young adults, but dominates social networking in many demographics. Even those who recognize its value still decry the use of social media as a cold environment that substitutes poorly for the flesh and blood gathering of real-life community. This is valid criticism if social network operates in a vacuum, never interfacing outside its cyber-existence. But when a site on the Internet becomes a place where millions are updating their status and sharing their lives to friends and distant acquaintances, it isn't long before God transforms it into a vehicle for grace.

A short time ago in an inner-city parish in New England, God whispered his grace into the air, transforming the mundane into the sublime. This was not one of those mega-parishes with multiple ministries and glitzy websites. This was a small, ethnic parish that was going about the mundane business of parish life. It was the typical call from a funeral director to the pastor that started a chain of events that led to a grace-filled moment of social media magic.

Funerals are part of the ebb and flow of parish life. Much of the pastoral energy is expended on journeying with the family of the deceased as they face this difficult passage. A pastor may even seize the opportunity to welcome back the loved ones if they have been disconnected from their faith community. This was not the situation when a well-respected pastor received the call from a local funeral home. A middle-aged

man had died alone, found in his home days later. There were no people to contact, for there was neither family nor friend programmed into the contacts on his cell phone. All that was asked of the priest was that he conduct a simple grave-side service for this man who had passed through and out of life without notice. Moved by the desperate loneliness of this request, the priest resolved to give the man the final parting that all Christians deserve.

STANDING-ROOM FUNERAL

Wishing to have a few people present at the funeral, the pastor contacted some of the members of his parish and asked that they attend a funeral for a man they did not know, on a weekday morning when most people are at their jobs. People talked to people, the school community was activated, but when messages were shared on Facebook, something

extraordinary happened. On the morning of the funeral, there was standing room only in the church. The children of the parish school attended, the members of the various parish ministries were represented, parishes from around the area came, friends of friends on Facebook filled the pews. The choir led the congregation, and all voices were lifted in song

until the final verse was sung. The funeral directors, overwhelmed by the response, did not have enough placards for the many cars that followed the procession to the cemetery to lay this man to rest.

On this day in a building tucked away among the old factories of an industrial age that has long passed, the church was neither a building nor a hierarchy, but was the embodiment of God's love. Just as God's love is meant to be incarnated everyday in our lives, so too should our use of social media be embodied by our interactions with one another. We gather to lift each other up when life becomes too heavy, or celebrate together the passages of life; no cyber-network can substitute for this. The man who died alone was lifted up to God within the warm embrace of a community that he did not know in life, but will experience, we hope, in the ever after. God is not bound by the limitations of our human culture, but does not hesitate to use whatever is available to create a masterpiece of *communio*. ■

Claire M. McManus, STL, is the Director of Faith Formation for the diocese of Fall River, Massachusetts.

Facebook is no longer the exclusive cyber-hangout of college kids and hip young adults, but dominates social networking in many demographics.

The NCCL Experience

Maria Cruz-Córdoba



Every year, we are invited to “Save Me a Place” for the annual National Conference for Catechetical Leadership (NCCL) and many of us turn it down with excuses such as: “I don’t have the time,” “We don’t have it in our budget this year,” or “I’d rather be doing something else.” Whether it is indeed

travel restrictions, no budget, or a lack of time, I find that going to this conference helps me be a better diocesan director by praying with others, sharing ideas, renewing my faith, and getting to know other leaders.

Here are my top reasons to attend the NCCL conference and consider it a worthwhile investment.

RESOURCES

Whether you need to find a speaker to present his or her views on a particular topic, or you are looking for new books or materials, NCCL has numerous presenters who can keep you up-to-date on the latest themes in catechizing through media, or learning something new. In addition, there are many exhibitors that have a plethora of information and resources to share, for example, to find a new way to teach prayer, or updated versions of catechetical textbooks.

IDEAS

We need to open up and think outside the box. By attending the different workshops or presentations available at NCCL, you gain a variety of ideas and insight for your own use. It may be a different teaching method or activity, or how a prayer service incorporates music, drama, or dance. There are many creative suggestions you can take away from the different sessions, including important areas such as art and the environment. For example, the unique display of centerpieces on the tables, or the use of banners on the stage can make a difference for your next gathering.

RENEWAL OF SPIRIT

If you are the person always responsible for teaching others, this is the moment to set aside time for yourself and renew the spirit within you. Many times we get so bogged down with work that we forget to take care of ourselves. At NCCL, there are many opportunities to nurture the spirit through prayer, sharing faith stories, and listening to the voice of God through the message presented by our speakers.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

We are people of influence and we need to continually grow as disciples. Sometimes we become stagnant in how we teach, or we find that we keep repeating the same stories. By

attending workshops and presentations, we learn the latest in catechesis and evangelization, effective communication skills, and at the same time improve our own skills in our professional areas.

COLLABORATION AND COMMITTEES

There are many committees with which you can choose to collaborate, such as rural catechesis, forum on Hispanic catechesis, technology, media, and the list goes on. All these committees are open to any member who is interested in lending their voice and improving that area of need.

NETWORKING

Here is a place that has a wealth of knowledgeable people. “Strangers are just friends that you haven’t met yet!” That was the saying on our bulletin board when I worked at a parish in Florida. Attending the NCCL conference has made a significant difference in my career. Upon arriving, you can be intimidated by the hundreds of people that are in attendance, especially if you are an introvert or have arrived by yourself. Fortunately, there is a meeting for first-time attendees and that allows an opportunity to meet others. Being alone is short-lived since there are many opportunities to meet people and make new friendships.

SCHOLARSHIPS

I have been fortunate to be attending the past three years through the generosity of scholarships. For those of you who are in financial need, take advantage and apply for the many scholarships that are available. This year, I am the recipient of the Diocesan Directors Scholarship and am grateful to be able to attend and contribute as a member.

Therefore, the next time you look at your budget or write that next grant, make sure to include the monies to travel and attend this year’s 78th Annual NCCL Conference and Exposition in St. Louis, Missouri, from May 19-22, 2014. It is worth your time and money.

Maria Cruz-Córdoba is the director of religious education for the Archdiocese of Santa Fe and NCCL Archdiocesan Director Representative Council for the Santa Fe Province. Her email address is mcruzcordoba@archdiosf.org.

Recognizing God's Movement

Leisa Anslinger



Advent is upon us, the beginning of a new liturgical year. I always find this season to be particularly beautiful and challenging. With its focus on the end of time, shifting eventually to anticipation of our celebration of the Incarnation, Advent seems rooted in the place where human experience and the divine life meet. Following all of the activity of early autumn and with Lent still a few months away, Advent seems the perfect time to step back for a moment, think about our ministry as catechetical leaders, and point ourselves toward the year to come.

TRINITARIAN LIFE

How do we help parents and families to appreciate that human experience and the divine life of the Trinity are to meet, not only on Sundays, but also in all of our lives? This is one of the primary aims of catechetical ministry, is it not? There is growing evidence that teens and young adults are looking for this very thing from us, and when parents and other adults give evidence of personal experiences of God — sometimes speaking of the miraculous — our youth and younger adults are more likely to acquire deeply personal and living faith themselves. But isn't this true for all of us?

Think of the most recent retreat or day of reflection in which you participated. Typically, group retreats include opportunities for us to not only reflect on the ways God is working in our lives, but to share those experiences with one another. The sharing is often as powerful as the reflection. Often, we find ourselves recognizing God's movement within our hearts and lives by listening to others share their experiences. We are meant to be with and for one another! This is precisely where the season of Advent leads us as people of faith, not only in retreat moments, but in our daily interactions with one another. God breaks in to human history, bearing mercy, forgiveness, love, and compassion, and draws us to himself to do the same.

SPIRITUAL EXERCISES FOR ADVENT

At times, our ministry can seem to be more about administration than service, more about organization than leading others to Christ. Advent is the perfect time to remember that Christ calls us first to be disciples and witnesses to the impact of faith in our own lives, and to consider the ways in which we may help those we serve to do the same, at home, in their workplaces, and in the world.

Here are the steps I resolve to follow this Advent. I invite you to join with me in this exercise this holy season, knowing that by doing so now, our Christmas will be a real celebration that God is with us, while we are with and for the families we serve.

1. Make a list of the ways we recognize God working with us and our families, now, in this time and place.
2. Each day, share an experience of God's presence with at least one person. Be as specific as possible. If the occurrence seems miraculous, say so!
3. Ask the people in your life to share their experiences as well.
4. Invite the parents with whom you interact to make their list, put it on the fridge, the family table, or their prayer space at home.
5. Tie this sharing to the Advent wreath, and to the manger. This season is a time in which people are open to the idea that God wants to be near us. Do not let the opportunity pass!
6. As we approach the Christmas season, plan to carry your witness into the new year. How will your renewed awareness of and appreciation for Christ's incarnate presence shape the year to come? How will your ministry be changed as a result? How might you guide your families to know, love, and serve the Lord more deeply as a result?
7. Remember that this awareness of the immediate love of God in Christ is to be shared with those who most need it; those who are poor, lonely, ill, and in prison must come to experience Christ through our attention, care, and sharing. Not only now, in this holy season, but in the days and weeks of the holy year to come. Invite your families to join with you in this sharing, and be prepared to experience God's love, made manifest ever more deeply. ■

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.

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

Compiled by Dan Pierson

Catholic Book Awards

Each spring the Catholic Press Association and the Association of Catholic Publishers present awards, recognizing books that have been submitted for review. Here is a sampling of titles receiving awards for 2013. For a complete list, visit the websites.

Association of Catholic Publishers Awards

<http://www.catholicpublishers.org/>

Genius Born of Anguish by Michael Higgins (Paulist Press)

I Wasn't Dead When I Wrote This by Lisa-Marie Calderone-Stewart (Loyola Press)

Saved by Beauty: A Spiritual Journey with Dorothy Day by Br. Michael O'Neill McGrath, OSFS (World Library Publications)

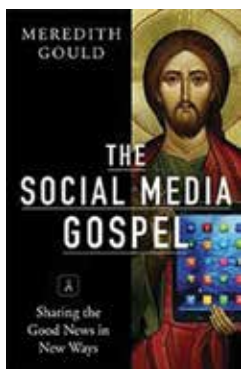
The Social Media Gospel: Sharing the Good News in New Ways by Meredith Gould (Liturgical Press)

In *The Social Media Gospel*, Meredith Gould helps church leaders and volunteers think more carefully about why and when to use social media.

Gould focuses on strategy, pointing out that before using the tools, it is imperative to gather information about the many audiences, clarify goals, and develop a clear, jargon-free message.

"Social media platforms are only tools — fun to use but worthless if you don't have a clearly defined purpose and message."

The Social Media Gospel is a resource that offers the foundational principles and direction for strategically and effectively using social media in a variety of church settings



and for facilitating faith formation and ministry.

The Parish Guide to Social Media: How Social Networking Can Recharge Your Ministry by Clarissa Valbuena Aljentera (Twenty-Third Publications)

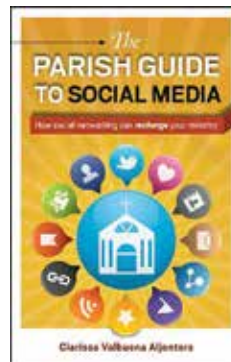
In *The Parish Guide to Social Media: How Social Networking Can Recharge Your Ministry*, Clarissa Valbuena Aljentera shows how social media can be integrated into ministries in the parish.

The publisher summarizes, "From Facebook and Flickr to Tumblr and Twitter, here are strategies, tips, and advice for putting it all to work and getting active parish support. An indispensable tool for the New Evangelization!"

The Message®: Catholic/Ecumenical Edition (ACTA Publications)

The Message: Catholic/Ecumenical Edition with the deuterocanonical books translated by William Griffin is the first edition that includes the books of Judith, Tobit, Sirach, Wisdom, Baruch, 1 and 2 Maccabees, and additions to Esther and Daniel.

Eugene Peterson and William Griffin, translator of the deuterocanonical books, have made the Scriptures come alive again by translating them in a way that people can understand what God is trying to say to them today. With the addition of the deuterocanonical books, *The Message* is now appropriate for Catholic, Anglican, and Orthodox readers.



Greg Pierce, publisher of ACTA Publications says that, "This Bible is meant to be read. The Message is not meant to be a substitute for your other bible translations. It is meant to sit next to them where you can pick it up and simply start reading. We hope it will send you back to your other translations with new insight and curiosity."

Alice Camille, author of many books on Scripture and award-winning columnist for *U.S. Catholic Magazine* says, "*The Message* is so startlingly new, it often makes me laugh out loud and nod my head with its frank and practical approach. I think the prophet Jeremiah would say: 'That's what I meant!' And I feel sure Saint Paul talked just like this."

ACTA has developed a free e-mail subscription delivered to subscribers' inboxes every Monday with the following week's Sunday readings from *The Message: Catholic/Ecumenical Edition*. **New Message 4 Next Week** can be used for silent reflection before Mass, weekly Bible study meetings, or as general reflection. Sign up at catholicecumenicalmessage.com.

An accompanying book entitled *Selections from the Message* is available in paperback and Kindle editions. ■

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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