

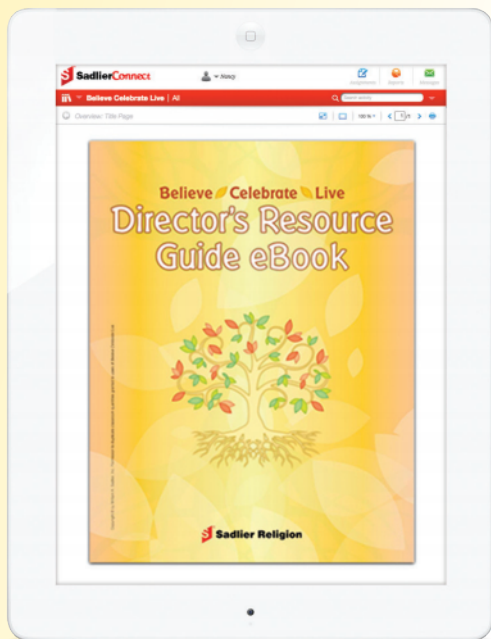


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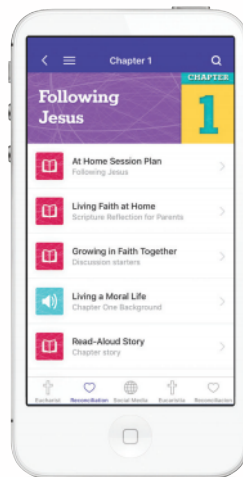
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A PUBLICATION OF THE NATIONAL CONFERENCE FOR CATECHETICAL LEADERSHIP (NCCL)

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Liminal Space, the Messy Middle

D E N I S E U T T E R

I recently attended the STORY conference in Nashville, where more than 1,400 people explored the theme “Between,” reflecting on that liminal space of “no longer, but not yet.” As the conference unfolded, speakers who included authors, screenwriters, musicians, photographers, and people from Google, Apple, and NASA talked about times in their lives when they felt stuck, paralyzed, unable to move, or forced to move on, but not sure what came next. They witnessed to fear, depression, disappointment, feelings of unworthiness, desire for answers, and desire for a clarity of what awaited them.

Then they spoke of the growth that happens when you allow yourself to stay there, to “wait” in that space, to lean into the unknown, because after the darkness comes light. They honored this space. They called it sacred. They offered humanity, vulnerability, and incredible hope.

They asked the audience to dream big, to commit to living (and telling) stories worth committing our lives to, to serve this world by remembering, and sharing, what is experienced in that liminal space. If we rush through it too quickly, they warned, the beauty that could have been born will be left unknown.

Guided by faith through transition

First, I thought of my own personal liminal space, the empty-nester stage my husband and I have experienced in recent years, still parents but no longer participating in their daily lives. Our story of a family of five sitting around the dinner table has shifted. One child has married. Two live in other cities. That once well-known identity no longer fits. Our new story is evolving. We sold the suburban house, moved into an apartment in the city, and are considering, as we sit at a table for two, “What’s next?” “Where are we going?” I’m not sure, and though I’m enjoying the adventure, I’d really, really like a plan. I’m much more comfortable with a plan. But I wait, not rushing the now.

Then I began to think of our changing landscape in the church: the disaffiliated, the scandals, the dual crises we discussed at last year’s conference. Hosffman Ospino of Boston College spoke then of the prophetic dimension of catechesis in difficult times. He reminded us that in such times, we are being called to take on this prophetic role, to explore what it means to evangelize in the midst of scandal and sorrow, in the midst of a generation that is less trusting of institutions.

To be prophetic means to pay attention to, to discern, and then to respond to the “signs of the times.” We’d like to be past all this, to not have to live through the darkness; but the truth is, we need this in-between. We can’t pretend it didn’t happen, isn’t happening, or we will never realize the potential transformation.

The upcoming release of the updated “General Directory for Catechesis” is a fresh reminder (as is the original directory) that we must “speak meaningfully to this generation.” Only the journey through such a liminal space will allow us to develop a renewed ecclesiology for a wounded community, as Ospino challenged us.


How NCCL is listening to the Spirit

As I reflected further, I also thought of the National Conference for Catechetical Leadership. We can certainly say we are in a liminal space. We stand on the shoulders of those who came before us, of those who made it possible for laypeople to take on the leadership roles we have today, those who have catechized and evangelized generations.

But this changing landscape leaves us to examine our story, our role in supporting members, and—as parishes and dioceses face budget cuts, staff reductions, and other financial hardships—our role in evangelizing this culture. As a membership organization, what are we being called to? How are we living into our next story? Are we listening to how the Spirit will guide us?

I believe we are, but we need you to join us in asking the right questions and in deep prayer. Our mission to evangelize and catechize, to enhance the ministerial effectiveness of the members of NCCL, remains the same, but in this too, we must be willing to let go of old structures, old methods, old stories that no longer fit.

Toward this end, the Board of Directors recently hired Meitler, an outside consulting group, whose partners have many years of experience in working with dioceses, parishes, Catholic schools, and other nonprofit organizations. We believe this objective review of all aspects of this organization, internal and external, will allow us to more fully live into the prophetic role Ospino spoke of last spring.

Further, as Ospino challenged us, we must foster communities and leaders who speak with prophetic voice to the Good News of the Gospel. That’s a story worth committing one’s life to. 

Guided by the Gifts of the Spirit

MARGARET MATIJASEVIC

The National Conference for Catechetical Leadership 2020 Convocation Committee has been planning for the annual gathering of the NCCL membership, dedicating itself to the process of discernment through the invocation of the Holy Spirit. To be open to the Spirit's response requires a seriousness in attentiveness, clarity in listening, and honesty in responding.

The gifts of the Spirit can guide NCCL to enter into a prayerful centeredness, especially as the NCCL Board of Directors has committed the organization to a comprehensive consultative process, facilitated through the Meitler consulting firm, to assist the organization in planning for a viable future.

This is a time to consider the opportunities for NCCL, including our community and story, assuring that all our commitments are in alignment with God's will. What is God asking of us during this time of anticipating a new general directory for catechesis? During a time of a dual crisis in leadership in the church? During a time of restructuring in various diocesan and parish offices and adjustment of budget priorities? During a time of a comprehensive consulting process for our organization?

Grant upon us the gift of wisdom to explore the direction in which God is guiding the ministries of evangelization and catechesis.

This gift offers the NCCL community an opportunity to more deeply understand one another and our shared ministry. It provides a primacy toward compassion through sympathetic presence to each other. During this time of polarization in the church, in the nation, and in the world, let us seek a deeper understanding of one another. As members explore new horizons for the organization, we pray for insight into the best ways to serve catechetical and evangelizing leaders in the church.

Come, Holy Spirit, reveal to us that which can provide clarity in knowing the hearts of the other. Help us hold gently a love for each other as we seek to know you better.

As NCCL transitions into a comprehensive discernment process with Meitler, the community is prioritizing counsel. This is a time for us to reflect upon the stewardship of the organization's resources, bringing to prayer the ability to have right judgment in future decision making.

Be generous, Advocate, in assisting NCCL members in acting with prudence toward a greater stewardship of the organization's re-

sources, through the charisms you have instilled within each one of us. Help us to live the Gospel more fully with each decision we make.

These have been trying times for our church and for our ministries. At the NCCL Convocation in May 2019, we prayed together, naming our burdens and our commitments to restoring hope in those areas of life. We have to be a courageous people, dedicated to responding to the call of the Lord.

Paraclete, instill within us courage—a strength to overcome obstacles so as to proclaim the Gospel to its fullest!

Taking in data, looking at trends, and hearing from you allow a fuller knowledge of the landscape and the needs of the catechetical and evangelizing ministerial community. Share the beauty of God's presence in your life by offering the knowledge of your experience. Help the organization gain deeper awareness of the realities in our ministries today so that we can be encouraged to move beyond obstacles and more deeply into shared mission.


Generous God, we are grateful for the knowledge you have given us. Help us use it for the fuller revelation of your presence and glory.

God is indeed merciful and generous. This is a time for us to be aware of our confidence in God and to trust that God will guide this process and this meaningful change for this organization.

Gracious God, we put our trust in you. Guide us with mercy and generosity so we can live into the abundance of gifts you have provided to us.

Don't be afraid to marvel at the complexity of what unfolds during these months and days, in your own prayer, and in the community of this ministry. God will be abundantly present to us in this process and will offer amazing opportunities of profound movements. Be open to them.

Lord, help me be open to all that you offer me. Help me recognize your constant blessings and respond to them with my whole being.

In the upcoming days, you will receive requests for participation in a survey from the Meitler process. I request your prayerful consideration of participating. At the annual convocation, the Meitler consultants will be present to assist in the comprehensive assessment and consideration of future models. Come, join us, and (re)Discover the Spirit of Truth moving in our ministries today. 

The Prophetic Dimension of Catechesis in Difficult Times

HOSFFMAN OSPINO

Catechetical leaders in the United States today are confronted with complex challenges that require competencies that perhaps we never thought we would need when we accepted the invitation to share our faith in our faith communities. Weren't we supposed to follow an easy set of tasks? Choose a meeting space, welcome those we meet for the catechetical encounter, explore some resources, share our faith with enthusiasm, invite people to be good Christian disciples, and then go on to give witness of what we have heard and seen. It sounds simple. This is what countless of Christians have done throughout the centuries.

The tasks remain pretty much the same, indeed. What makes the entire catechetical enterprise more complex and challenging is *context*. We discern the faith and share it with one another in the here and now of our own realities. We advance the catechetical ministry of the church with an increased sense of historical consciousness that demands that we read the signs of the times (see), engage critically the realities that shape our lives (judge), and respond to such realities informed by the Gospel (act).

Catechetical leaders in the United States cannot remain oblivious to the many realities that call into question how we do catechesis in a pluralistic and changing society. I have written about this elsewhere (see, for instance, my book *Interculturalism and Catechesis: A Catechist's Guide to Responding to Cultural Diversity*, Twenty-Third Publications). However, one reality has hit the Catholic community harder than anything else in recent history: the sexual abuse of minors by clergy and other pastoral leaders. Writing those words fills me with pain. Equally painful is to learn about the decades-long efforts to cover up such cases, the flurry of inadequate responses that have worsened the pain of those abused and their families, and the existence of institutional and societal paradigms that create the conditions for such dynamics to happen.

In the midst of the horror caused by the scandal of sexual abuse of minors in our own church and the ensuing crises associated with this horror, there are glimpses of hope that include in particular measures to prevent sexual abuse in our faith communities. It is also a sign of hope that there are more resources to provide support to the victims and their families. More efforts to do justice to the victims are in place, mindful that sexual abuse destroys lives and that, for many, full healing may never happen.

The catechetical community in the United States needs to be engaged in these conversations, raising awareness about what happened so we can understand it better and making sure that it does not happen again. It also needs to be at the forefront of all conversations in our church to create a culture that combines awareness, reconciliation, healing, and even reconstruction. We cannot ignore the fact that millions of Catholics in recent decades stopped self-identifying as such as a result of the sexual abuse scandal and all the dynamics associated with it. Many of them left, feeling betrayed and disappointed. Many stayed but live on the fringes of our faith communities, discerning their next steps. It is likely that some of them are waiting for catechetical leaders to offer a word of wisdom. Perhaps others question the purpose of engaging in any form of catechetical conversation unless it leads them authentically to a transforming encounter with Jesus Christ in the here and now of their reality, and to the beauty of our Catholic tradition in ways that are truly engaging.

At stake is the type of catechetical and faith formation efforts that we want to offer to our Catholic sisters and brothers in difficult times. Whether such efforts are geared to making a case for Catholicism (even when institutionally we journey as a wounded community), to discerning further commitment in light of our faith, or to stirring a renewed sense of discipleship, we need catechetical efforts grounded in reality. At this particular time in history, and in response to the challenges of passing on the faith after the scandal of sexual abuse of minors by clergy and other pastoral leaders, the catechetical community must engage in intentional conversations that lead to pedagogies, practices, and resources imbued with a prophetic spirit.

Acknowledging the gravity of sexual abuse in the church

I commend the leadership of the National Conference for Catechetical Leadership (NCCL) for addressing straightforwardly with its membership the reality of sexual abuse of minors by clergy and other pastoral leaders during its 2019 annual convocation. It was a much-needed conversation and most likely one that must remain ongoing. This article draws insights from my remarks at the meeting addressing the entire body of participants. By reflecting on these pressing issues, the NCCL is challenging the larger Catholic catechetical community not to settle in the backseat of this conversation



as spectators but to lead the way, mindful of its enormous capacity to reach out to millions of Catholics every week.

At the convocation, Dr. Kathleen McChesney, a nationally recognized expert helping Catholics to address adequately questions of sexual abuse in our communities, offered a keynote presentation entitled “Evangelizing in the Midst of Scandal and Sorrow: What You Need to Know about Sexual Abuse in Catholic Ministries.” Allow me to highlight five key points that Dr. McChesney made. (I use my own words in this summary.)

First, Catholics should not underestimate the damage, effects, and gravity of the sin of sexual abuse. Such sin is social, ecclesial, and structural.

Second, the victims are real, flesh-and-blood people, not just numbers and statistics, whose lives have been altered forever. The victims are not faceless, ageless, invisible, or marginalized anymore. They are our sisters and brothers next to us, our neighbors who cry out for justice.

Third, it is urgent that we as a community stand in solidarity with the victims of sexual abuse and always err on the side of justice toward them. The entire people of God (the church) is wounded by the suffering of those affected by sexual abuse in our ecclesial settings. US Catholics will journey in the decades to come as a wounded community that will require a unique kind of catechesis.

Fourth, we cannot address the complexity associated with the sin of sexual abuse in the church alone. We need help: law enforcement, policy makers, government, scholars, families, pastoral leaders, lay women and men, the ordained, and the consecrated, among others. This crisis is helping us to look at Catholicism in a much broader way, rather than reducing it to the affairs of the clergy or just those who work in parishes and chanceries.

Fifth, a culture of prevention is yielding important fruits. However, we know that there were 219 new cases of abuse between 2004 and 2017. Far too many. In fact, one child abused by someone representing the church or in the context of Catholic ministry is far too many! We cannot lower the guard. A culture of prevention requires denouncing this sin whenever we see it and holding people accountable when they fail to denounce it or when there are signs of a cover-up. It also demands addressing the structures that enabled such evil and its multiple expressions possible: there is much work to do in this regard. The work has barely begun.

Reading difficult realities as Catholics

It should be clear that there is a unique sense of gravity and urgency associated with sexual abuse of minors by clergy and other pastoral leaders. Many people in our faith communities are hurting, others are confused, and many in our faith tradition want to build spaces and communities where everyone, especially our children, feel safe while growing in their relationship with the Lord. This is a unique opportunity for the catechetical community to take a leading role.

There is no doubt that the scourge of sexual abuse of minors demands that we seek informed advice from professionals in the fields of law enforcement, psychology, sociology, and education, among others. Remember, we cannot do this alone. At the same time, we need to draw from our own theological and spiritual wells. Catholics have inherited great resources from our centuries-old tradition that can be of incredible assistance today as catechetical leaders forge the way forward, envisioning faith formation initiatives that respond to the challenges of today with prophetic voice.

I would like to propose two such resources or lenses to re-envision the catechetical task in difficult times: reading the signs of the times and synodality.

READING THE SIGNS OF THE TIMES

A hallmark of contemporary Catholic theological reflection is what many call “historical consciousness.” It is not that theologians, pastoral agents and catechetical leaders in the past were unaware of history. What has evolved is how we understand our role in history. In other words, Catholics have increasingly moved away from an idea of history perceived as a given set of conditions that we cannot control, a view that treated human beings mostly as passive beings, thus reinforcing a form of determinism (i.e., someone or something else defines our lives and our future). Today we are more at home with the conviction that we are active agents of our history in partnership with God. We know that whatever happens in our lives happens in the *here* (space) and *now* (time) of our existence. Our lives—with their complexity, intricacies, and sometimes messiness—are part of the history of salvation! We participate in the process of defining history, especially the present and the future, making decisions, engaging one another, and remaining aware that whether we speak up or remain silent when confronted with reality has consequences.

Inserted in a historical context within which we find ourselves as agents in relationship with others, God, and the world, we then



proceed to engage reality as we encounter it. With the gift of faith—understood here as a theological virtue and a gift from God (cf. Eph 2:8)—we read that reality with the goal of finding meaning and discovering the signs of God’s reign. Though we know that God’s reign transcends our historical and material realities, most of the time we experience it precisely within those realities, including the social, cultural, and even political structures that shape our lives. An attentive reading of reality with the eyes of faith is what we call “reading the signs of the times.” The Second Vatican Council named it well: to carry out the church’s evangelizing mission, “the Church has always had the duty of scrutinizing the signs of the times and of interpreting them in the light of the Gospel” (“*Gaudium et Spes*,” 4).

Every Christian, in light of our baptismal condition, has the power and the responsibility to read the signs of the times to discover the signs of God’s reign as well as the signs that contradict it. To do this we must remain sincerely and humbly open to the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives. No catechetical initiative can consider itself authentic, and frankly effective, unless it prepares Christians of all ages to be experts in reading the signs of the times! Such reading is not merely the result of human effort, of course, although it demands a conscious engagement of voices beyond the ecclesial settings that catechesis regularly inhabits. We need catechetical leaders that are both steeped in the best of the Catholic theological tradition and comfortable engaging various fields of knowledge that help us to understand the complexity of our reality, especially on matters that go beyond our instinct or basic catechetical training.

The commitment to reading the signs of the times, which can be interpreted as an *exterior* moment of discernment, must be accompa-

nied by a more *interior* moment called spiritual discernment, which is a gift of the Holy Spirit. Spiritual discernment allows us, in a prayerful attitude, to take a look at our own lives to determine what is of God and what is not; to assess to what extent we are doing God’s will or failing to do it. If we are able to do this interiorly, then we will be better prepared to see the signs of God’s reign in our midst. “Discernment is not about discovering what more we can get out of this life, but about recognizing how we can better accomplish the mission entrusted to us at our baptism. This entails a readiness to make sacrifices, even to sacrificing everything,” says Pope Francis (“*Gaudete et Exultate*,” 174). Furthermore, the pope affirms, discernment “is not a solipsistic self-analysis or a form of egotistical introspection, but an authentic process of leaving ourselves behind in order to approach the mystery of God, who helps us to carry out the mission to which he has called us, for the good of our brothers and sisters” (“*Gaudete et Exultate*,” 175). Spiritual discernment is necessary to live a Christian life characterized by self-sacrifice and altruism. Catechesis should be a natural place where all Christians learn how to do this.

SYNODALITY

The Catholic world in recent years has embarked in an intentional reflection about the idea of synodality. Pope Francis’s pontificate has certainly encouraged reflection about this important theological category, which appears regularly in his writing and teachings. The best articulation of synodality, which I invite every catechetical leader to explore and discuss, is the 2018 report from the International Theological Commission under the title “Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church.” The text is available online on the Vatican website.

The term synodality derives from two Greek words, *syn* (with) and *hodós* (path). Synodality is ultimately an invitation to *walk together* as a church, as a community of faith, in the ways of Jesus Christ. The category points to a conviction that most Catholics may feel tempted to take for granted—after all, being Catholic is about having a profoundly communal sense of living and practicing the faith. Yet, the category is countercultural, even in ecclesial contexts, particularly in Western societies where compartmentalization of institutions privileges a silo mentality. This silo mentality prevails in cases such as dioceses functioning in isolation from one another; diocesan and parish offices advancing their own goals without being attentive to what other offices are doing; strong organizations amassing vast amounts of resources without regard for those that may be in weaker positions; Catholic groups excluding one another in light of ideological agendas, and so on. In the United States, such silo mentality is often the result of what I would call the “American temptation” to practice Catholicism in ways that reflect more the values of the larger North American culture than the communally discerned convictions that have identified Catholic life for centuries. Among such cultural ways of life that often distract us, one could name some forms of unchecked—and almost naïve—egalitarianism that dismisses diverse vocations within the same community; a semi-Pelagian attitude that assumes that we can do it without help, either of God or others, simply because we are American; and a disheartening immediatism that wants instant solutions and gratification.

It is not surprising that when scandals like the sexual abuse of minors by clergy and other pastoral leaders are uncovered, anomalies such as poor communication channels, practices to conceal information, and the desire to preserve structures at the expense of the truth and the common good come to the fore. Granted, these anomalies are present in many institutions in our society. Yet, not all social institutions are committed to a theological vision grounded in the principles of the gospel and thus expect to be held accountable to such principles.

Synodality rests upon key ecclesial convictions, of which we can highlight five:

1. **Communal discernment.** While individual voices are important as well as those of particular groups, a synodal approach calls for mechanisms of consultation and dialogue that allow as many members of the ecclesial community as possible to express their voice about issues that are being discerned. In particular, a synodal approach makes sure that discernment is not limited to the elites or the most powerful groups within our faith communities but does everything possible to listen to all the baptized, including those at the grassroots and in the peripheries of church and society.
2. **Desire and openness to being guided by the Holy Spirit.** Synodality relies upon the gifts (i.e., charisms) of the Holy

Spirit to every baptized person included in the people of God. Such gifts are also conferred upon particular groups and communities to advance the church’s evangelizing mission. The Holy Spirit is God’s gift to the church, who in turn grants it the charisms that are necessary to be instrumental in building God’s reign in the here and now of history. The Holy Spirit guarantees that communion is not merely an aspiration but a reality.

3. **Explicit Catholic and missionary vocation.** Any form of ecclesial action must be at the service of the proclamation of the Good News of Jesus Christ to all. The church “exists to evangelize” (Paul VI, “*Evangelii Nuntiandi*,” 14). A synodal church is a community fully committed to evangelization, encouraging all the baptized to discern what is necessary to achieve this goal; reading the signs of the times, individually and communally, to do it effectively; and denouncing all instances of sin that may prevent the gospel from flourishing.
4. **Profound soteriological vision.** If the church exists to evangelize, then all its activities and commitments aim to facilitate the encounter with Jesus Christ that leads to salvation. Synodality is at the service of God’s plan of salvation: “Every synodal event prompts the Church to go outside the camp (cf. Hebrews 13:13) in order to bring Christ to people who are waiting to be saved by Him. ... The unity of the community is not real without this inner *télos* which guides it along the paths of time towards its eschatological goal, ‘that God may be all in all’ (1 Corinthians 15:28). We must always face up to the question: how can we truly be a synodal Church unless we live ‘moving outwards’ towards everyone in order to go together towards God?” (*Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, 109).
5. **Diversity of voices.** A church grounded in a spirit of synodality is aware of the multiplicity of voices that constitute it and listens attentively to all those voices, as companions on the journey, with the desire to learn in humility how they experience God while open to listening to God through them.

One interesting proposal that emerges as part of the reflection about synodality is that the church is to operate like an “inverted pyramid” in which “the summit is below the base.” While retaining the hierarchical dimension presupposed by traditional Catholic ecclesiology, an understanding that is based on the diversity of vocations and common mission of the baptized vis-à-vis the church’s evangelizing mission, the image refocuses perceptions and misperceptions—or at least tries to do so—regarding to the exercise of authority in the church. Citing Pope Francis, the International Theological Commission affirms, “In this Church, as in an inverted pyramid, the top is located below the base. Consequently, those who exercise authority are called ‘ministers,’ because, in the original meaning of the word, they are the least of all” (*Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, n. 57).

Synodality, then, calls for a fresher style of being church, renewed ecclesial structures that dare to go beyond self-referential and self-preserving paradigms, and synodal actions that make Catholicism more dynamic. Among such synodal actions, we could highlight the potential of synods and councils at various levels in the life of the church. Catechetical leaders are uniquely positioned to play a leading role in these synodal conversations.

Toward a catechesis that is prophetic, discerning, and synodal

My sense is that catechetical initiatives and catechetical leaders committed to reading the signs of the times and spiritual discernment with renewed impetus, and to embracing and modeling more synodal ways of being church, can become true symbols of hope at this time in history. Furthermore, this is a fair expectation as we address the complex and painful dynamics associated with sexual abuse of minors by clergy and other pastoral leaders. The above reflections provide a good framework to advance the conversation. Within such framework, we should be able to envision a catechesis that embodies the following characteristics:

It must help the people of God name sin, in articulate ways, in all its expressions—individual, communal, and structural—and its resulting woundedness. Catechesis should never be a space to hide from difficult conversations or conceal sin. Rather, it should be the space where such conversations take place in an informed and prayerful way.

It must be grounded in the word of God (Scriptures and tradition) as the compass guiding it regarding content, goals, inspiration, and pedagogical commitments.


It must be informed by contemporary sciences and fields of knowledge that provide us with important resources to understand one another, the world in which we live, and the realities that affect our daily lives.

It must embrace a synodal vision [*syn* (with); *hodós* (path)], a way of being church in which we all journey together with God, one another, and the world toward salvation in Jesus Christ. In this synodal vision we commit to acknowledging the presence of the Holy Spirit in each baptized person and thus to making every possible effort to listen to one another in prayerful discernment.

It must be committed to building communion among Christian disciples who long for what is true, good, and beautiful.

It must be practical and devoted to the transformation of lives in the here and now of history. We cannot accept catechetical practices that ignore the historical realities of our time or catechetical leaders who fail to understand history or who dismiss, willingly or unwillingly, the influence of the forces—good or bad—that shape people's lives in history.

It must help Catholics to be instruments of healing and reconciliation, creating safe spaces for all, denouncing evil in all its forms, and providing the necessary accompaniment and support to those most vulnerable among us who have been victims of sinful behaviors. In this sense, catechesis must be prophetic at all times.

Guided by the Holy Spirit, it must empower the rich diversity of voices that constitute the church to read the signs of the times and become experts in spiritual discernment to discover the signs of God's reign. 

Hosffman Ospino, PhD, is an associate professor of theology and religious education at Boston College, School of Theology and Ministry. He is also the director of graduate programs in Hispanic ministry. He has written and edited 13 books and regularly speaks at religious education and evangelization conferences. Email: ospinoho@bc.edu.



Guided by the Holy Spirit,
it must empower the rich diversity of voices....





Accompaniment: The Melody Continues

SARA BLAUVELT

Until recently, I considered accompaniment to be a musical term—that element of music that supports and draws together multiple voices or instruments into a harmonious melody. An accomplished accompanist knows his or her musical part but also listens to and guides the other parts as they blend their unique elements of the music. Accompanying challenges all the musicians to work together in relationship as they create something beautiful. With the election of Pope Francis in 2013, the word *accompaniment* has taken root in my ministerial lexicon.

As I consider how I am called to accompany in ministry, I find that the same principles as in music hold true. As a ministerial accompanist, I know the “music” and have a long history with the tune, but mine is not the only voice. The church’s song is enriched through the harmonious relationship of voices and instruments joined together in discipleship. Relationship is the heart and goal of ministerial accompaniment; we go out of ourselves with the aim of drawing others into relationship with Christ and each other.

Recognizing the need to grow in my capacity to accompany, I reflect on the wisdom of Pope Francis, who states: “Our personal experience of being accompanied and assisted, and of openness to those who accompany us, will teach us to be patient and compassionate with others, and to find the right way to gain their trust, their openness and their readiness to grow” (“*Evangelii Gaudium*,” 172).

With this in mind, I suggest that the movements of the baptismal catechumenate—encounter, form, send—should inspire the movements of accompaniment. This model of accompaniment can accommodate and adapt to each person’s journey of faith in Christ, even as it equips them for participation in the life and mission of the community.

The Second Vatican Council gave us tools to explore the wisdom of Jesus’s ministry as it invited us to consider social discernment as an essential element of discipleship. We are reminded: “The Church has always had the duty of scrutinizing the signs of the times and of interpreting them in the light of the Gospel” (“*Gaudium et Spes*,” 4).

As we scan the cultural landscape, we see an ever-changing reality. Our history of passing on the faith through the catechumenate can and should inform our present and future

approaches to accompaniment. We should engage in a spirit of enculturating prevailing aspects of culture with the wisdom of past methodologies. No single method is applicable to every situation, but there is a perennial model of accompaniment—and Jesus is our model.

The catechumenal process springs from a perfect model of encounter with Christ himself on the evening of the first Easter on the road to Emmaus. Done well, the baptismal catechumenate recognizes the necessity of identifying and addressing the particular needs of each individual and their experience of God. The catechumenate recognizes that growth in faith happens in discernable periods, which vary from person to person, and requires flexibility, patience, and trust in the Holy Spirit.

In educational terms, through the periods of the catechumenate we learn about our lives before we focus on formation in the faith. Only then do we choose faith, which leads to a lifelong deepening of faith and sense of mission. Following in the footsteps of Jesus on the road to Emmaus, we find a Christocentric model of encounter, accompaniment, and sending.

Now I will explore the movements exemplified in the Emmaus story and offer suggestions for how this can shape our efforts of accompaniment.

Encounter

“Jesus himself drew near and walked with them, but their eyes were prevented from recognizing him” (Lk 24:15–16).

On the road to Emmaus, Jesus draws near to listen and walk with two disciples. Organic, authentic encounter is rarely, if ever, planned, but rather is born of two hearts meeting on the road. To become adults of encounter requires that we be flexible, humble, determined, and patient. We must learn to suspend our preconceived notions of ministry as program to ministry as relationship. The relational nature of accompaniment requires a new spirit of patience, as Pope Francis again gives focus: “The pace of this accompaniment must be steady and reassuring, reflecting our closeness and our compassionate gaze which also heals, liberates and encourages growth in the Christian life” (“*Evangelii Gaudium*,” 169). We must come to expect that accompaniment will take place beyond traditional programs and will transcend boundaries of parish, calendar, and schedule.



A practical consideration is to expand our understanding of who it is we are called to accompany. We are all one body in Christ ministering to one another. Within this broad lens, we as the church need to consider how best to accompany everyone. While universal accompaniment seems a daunting task, every baptized person is called to be a missionary disciple to others. Each of us is uniquely qualified to be an instrument of God's grace to help others "discover little by little the face of Christ and feel the need of giving themselves to Him" ("Evangelii Nuntiandi," 44). Within this mindset, our hearts expand as we accompany and are accompanied.

Accompany and form community

"Stay with us, for it is nearly evening and the day is over" (Lk 24:29).

Unsure but interested, the disciples beg Jesus to stay. Through the experience of walking together, listening, and discussing, they desire to know him more closely and be known by him more deeply. Born of the relational love of the Trinity, we are inherently relational people. As accompaniers, we help to move others through the threshold of encounter into relationship. Like Jesus, we remain present to others as they move from seeking answers to seeking belonging. Belonging will take the form of a lived relationship with Christ in the community of the faithful.

As confident accompanists, we learn that this can, and will, take many forms. Some we accompany will find, for the first time, relationship within the community of believers. If we accompany fellow ministers, relationship may move a person to new ways of ministry. What matters is that we remain faithfully present as an accompanying community, as the Holy Spirit opens hearts to commit to the Lord.

For many people today, young and old alike, there is a sense of ambivalence in affiliating with a community. However, there resides in each of us an inherent desire to be in communion with others. The dynamic of the catechumenate provides a model for engaging in community through small-group faith-sharing experiences, the purpose of which is to provide an opportunity for each member of the community to deepen their own conversion. To accompany and form through small-group ministry we must first create a space where listening and sharing are normative.

Pope Francis reminds us, "We need to practice the art of listening, which is more than simply hearing. Listening, in communication, is an openness of heart which makes possible that closeness without which genuine spiritual encounter cannot occur" ("Evangelii

Gaudium," 171). Our efforts to accompany will fail if we do not first truly listen to the stories and concerns of others. Ministers in the process of accompaniment should see themselves as facilitators—listening, synthesizing, encouraging, and keeping the group focused on the purpose of deepening conversion. Our work is to be a conduit of the grace of the Holy Spirit.

One practical application, born of the fruit of authentic listening, is to use the concerns or questions of those we encounter as we consider how best to accompany their spiritual needs. As in the catechumenal process, our encounter is only effective when we listen to the questions of those we accompany and provide space for conversation, worship, prayer, and service, to support integration of faith and life.

In a multifaceted approach to accompaniment, we are poised to assure others of our lasting support through their deepening relationship with Christ and his body the church. With this approach of addressing identified needs, we are in a better position to overcome the perception that the church is irrelevant, unresponsive, or apathetic to the needs of today.

Send

"Then they said to each other, 'Were not our hearts burning (within us) while he spoke to us on the way and opened the scriptures to us?'" (Lk 24:32).

If we have encountered and accompanied well, sending will be the natural next step. We see in the disciples a burning transformative love that impels them forward; they burn with the desire to tell others about their encounter with Christ. Reflecting on the encounter, they long to share how this experience has changed how they see the world. The mystagogical practices of the catechumenate provide an opportunity to move deeper into faith in light of a sacramental experience that impels us to act as missionary disciples.

Missionary spirit is born from the joyful remembrance of one's personal encounter with Christ. Pope Francis speaks of this when he says, "The joy of evangelizing always arises from grateful remembrance: it is a grace which we constantly need to implore. The apostles never forgot the moment when Jesus touched their hearts (Jn 1:39). The believer is essentially 'one who remembers.'" ("Evangelii Gaudium," 13). Each of us must be able to share our own moment of encounter and help others to do the same. In a spirit mystagogy, we need to create silent spaces for reflection on God's work in our lives.



The art of mystagogy helps us unpack the mysteries of faith illumined by our encounter with Christ and the meaning this holds in everyday life. In “Laudato Si,” Pope Francis offers a mystagogical reflection on the sacraments, which inspire our understanding of the all-pervasive accompaniment of Jesus in our lives. “Through our worship of God, we are invited to embrace the world on a different plane. Water, oil, fire and colours are taken up in all their symbolic power and incorporated in our act of praise. The hand that blesses is an instrument of God’s love and a reflection of the closeness of Jesus Christ, who came to accompany us on the journey of life” (“Laudato Si,” 235). Inspired and strengthened by the sacramental mysteries, we are better prepared to be effective accompaniers.

Mindful of Jesus’s presence in our lives, we strive to help others see this great gift in their own. Inviting others to share their story of faith is a necessary first step. “What we are speaking of is a process of accompaniment and discernment which guides the faithful to an awareness of their situation before God” (“Amoris Laetitia,” 300). As accompaniers, we must provide those we accompany with the tools they need to articulate their faith story. This may include offering opportunities to learn basic storytelling skills to help them build confidence in sharing their experience of Christ.


Through this process we invite others to consider moments, experiences, and people that shape their story. They might consider how God had worked in their life, what their experience has been of God, who has accompanied them along the way, or catalyst moments that sparked their faith. In telling our stories, we deepen our conviction and may deepen personal conversion in others as we accompany one another along the way.

On the road again

We are a church on pilgrimage. Along the journey of faith, we will encounter, accompany, and send others through our word and witness. Seeing every person as essential to the body of Christ will

enable us to see with fresh eyes the necessity of reaching into every strata of culture to share the Good News through accompaniment.

Pope Francis challenges each of us to claim the title missionary disciple. “The new evangelization calls for personal involvement on the part of each of the baptized. Every Christian is challenged, here and now, to be actively engaged in evangelization; indeed, anyone who has truly experienced God’s saving love does not need much time or lengthy training to go out and proclaim that love” (“Evangelii Gaudium,” 120). At this moment in our pilgrim journey, we must ensure that everyone is invited to share in the gift and responsibility of encountering, accompanying, forming community, and sending.

Accompaniment in ministry means listening to everyone and inviting them to add their melody line in the love song that is our faith. As one on a journey to accompany and be accompanied, I recall the words of St. Augustine: “Sing, but continue on your journey. Do not grow lazy, but sing to make the way more enjoyable. Sing, but keep going.” 

Sara Blauvelt serves as the director for catechesis for the Archdiocese of Washington. She holds an MA in religious education and catechesis from the Catholic University of America. A catechist for over 25 years, she finds that writing allows her to consider how to infuse new ardor in catechetical ministry. Sara can be reached at blauvelts@adw.org.

CATECHETICAL LEADER

PUBLISHER: National Conference for Catechetical Leadership
Catechetical Leader (ISSN 1547-7908) is typically published four times a year by the National Conference for Catechetical Leadership (NCCL), 810 7th Street NE, Washington, DC 20002.

Authors’ views do not necessarily reflect those of NCCL. Letters to the editor and submissions of news items are encouraged. Send to *Catechetical Leader* at the address above or email office@nccl.org. Phone: 202-750-4243.
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“Take Five”: Basic Principles for Cultivating Catechists

JAYNE RAGASA-MONDOY

As catechetical leaders, we want what is best for our catechists. We want to create a Christ-centered community of disciples who minister effectively and in harmony. Fostering this kind of growth takes thought and intentional leadership. So let's take some time out (“take five”) to prayerfully reflect upon five basic principles—mission, parameters, empowerment, recognition, and engagement—and their influence on cultivating catechists.

Mission

Catechetical leaders are delegated by their pastors to plan and implement programs. In our enthusiasm, it's tempting to roll up our sleeves and just jump in by “doing stuff.” But is being busy the same as being productive? Without a clear set of goals, purpose, or meaning, the answer is no. Effective leaders first take the time to understand and communicate the mission of the organization so that each person understands what to do and why it's important. They continually evaluate how the mission is being integrated into pastoral responses, operations, and decision-making processes.

What is our mission as catechists? Pause for a moment and jot down a word or phrase that best describes our mission. Now examine what you just wrote. Is this mission clear to each member of your catechetical team? How do you know this?

What does the church teach us about mission?

“Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you, and behold, I am with you always, until the end of the age.” (Mt 28:19; emphasis added)

“When the work which the Father gave the Son to do on earth was accomplished, the Holy Spirit was sent on the day of Pentecost in order that he might continually sanctify the Church. Then the Church was openly displayed to the crowds and the spread of the Gospel among the nations, through preaching, was begun. As the ‘convocation’ of all men for salvation, the Church in her very nature is missionary, sent by Christ to all the nations to make disciples of them.” (Catechism of the Catholic Church, 767; emphasis added)

“The Catechist walks from and with Christ. They are not persons who set out with their own ideas and tastes, but rath-

er who let themselves be looked at by him, by that gaze that makes the heart burn. The more Jesus occupies the center of our lives, the more he allows us to come out of ourselves; he de-centers us and he brings us closer to others. This dynamic of love is like the movement of the heart: ‘systole and diastole’; they concentrate to encounter the Lord and immediately open up, coming out of themselves for love, to bear witness to Jesus and speak of Jesus, to preach Jesus.” (Pope Francis, International Catechetical Symposium, Buenos Aires, July 2017; emphasis added)

Clearly, our mission is to bear witness and make disciples. To lead souls to Christ. How did this match up with the statement of mission you wrote down a moment ago?

To effectively develop catechists, leaders must make a clear distinction between a statement of mission and tasks. We often focus on tasks such as program supervision, parent communication, or retreat planning. But these tasks lack purpose without intentional focus on the mission. Indeed, mission integration is messy, highly relational work. But as Pope Francis taught us, Christ himself accompanies us in our mission, and he gives us one another for the journey.

As we go about our mission to make disciples, we also must be attentive to what the “General Directory for Catechesis” refers to as the “savoir faire,” the “doing,” the “way of proceeding.” Pope Francis reminds that in our mission to make disciples, we must proceed in such a way to “ensure that God's grace may touch the heart of every man and of every woman and lead them to him. Furthermore, for every Christian, for the whole Church, this is not an optional mission, but essential” (Pope Francis to the leaders of the apostolate of the laity in Korea, August 16, 2014).

With a clear statement of mission, we cultivate our catechists by inviting them to share their stories of faith—their stories of how God's grace touched their heart and the heart of someone they knew. We affirm that being a catechist is not just a job or weekend voluntary commitment. We don't “do” catechesis then go back to our usual lives. We *are* catechists, and our whole being is immersed in this mission.

Set Parameters

With a clear mission in mind, cultivating catechists includes setting parameters. For me, parameters can be viewed in three categories, which I refer to as the “3 Ps”—personal pa-

rameters, program parameters, and proclamation parameters.

Personal parameters include those designed to remind folks of how we are to treat one another. These include preventing your volunteers from committing verbal, physical, emotional, and sexual abuse of others or from being a victim of those abuses; communicating the expectation that we are to treat one other with respect; and not divulging personal information that is not meant for public or general knowledge (otherwise known as gossiping).

Program parameters include program expectations such as following instructions issued by your pastor and adhering to diocesan or parish norms and policies.

Proclamation parameters outline expectations for the spirit in which we are to teach. The parameters include developing and executing engaging lessons that follow these guidelines:

1. Propose, not impose, the gospel in compelling, age-appropriate ways. We hand down the sacred truths *and* hand over the gospel to be living and vibrant in the cultures and generations we serve.
2. Proclaim the gospel with confidence and meekness—not sternly or with force but in a spirit of great love.

In his encyclical “The Light of Faith,” Pope Francis writes:

Those who have opened their hearts to God’s love, heard his voice and received his light, cannot keep this gift to themselves. ... The word, once accepted, becomes a response, a confession of faith, which spreads to others and invites them to believe. ... The light of Christ shines, as in a mirror, upon the face of Christians; as it spreads, it comes down to us, so that we too can share in that vision and reflect that light to others, in the same way that, in the Easter liturgy, the light of the paschal candle lights countless other candles. Faith is passed on ... from one person to another, just as one candle is lighted from another. ... It is through an unbroken chain of witnesses that we come to see the face of Jesus.

Empower

Empowerment activates the gifts given to us by God in service to the community. It is intentional, communal, and an exercise in interdependence that, when done well, develops a level of trust that allows others to act on their own to achieve a certain goal. You see, with the exception of Christ himself, no one person is as

smart as all of us together. So, armed with a clear understanding of mission and parameters, empowerment invites delightfully creative Christ-centered outcomes.

We’ve all witnessed some facet of this: a medical professional who captivates youth by connecting faith, science, and reason; a retired police sketch artist who teaches children how to sketch profiles of saints; an information technology specialist who connects Christian ethics to social media use; a baker who teaches parents and children the ancient art of milling flour and preparing unleavened bread.

We also empower when we cultivate hidden gifts. In a trusting relationship, catechists are more receptive to taking the necessary risks, albeit one small step at a time, to develop gifts they didn’t realized they possessed. Examples could include a first-generation immigrant family who may be shy at first but who becomes a welcoming presence and mentor to other new families who speak the same language or come from a similar cultural background, or the introverted teen who, when introduced to the adoration of the Most Holy Eucharist, accepts the invitation to be a peer-ambassador of this holy devotion.

When we think about it, empowerment is most effective when the gifts God has given us are activated within the context of community.

It is therefore of supreme importance that we consent to live not for ourselves but for others. When we do this we will be able first of all to face and accept our own limitations. ... If we live for others, we will gradually discover that no one expects us to be “as gods.” We will see that we are human, like everyone else, that we all have weaknesses and deficiencies, and that these limitations of ours play a most important part in all our lives. It is because of them that we need others and others need us. We are not all weak in the same spots, and so we supplement and complete one another, each one making up in himself for the lack in another. (Thomas Merton, *No Man Is an Island* [Chicago: Shambhala, 2005], xxi)

Recognize

“The seventy returned with joy, saying, ‘Lord, in your name even the demons submit to us!’ He said them, ‘I have watched Satan fall from heaven like a flash of lightning. See, I have given you authority to tread on snakes and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy; and nothing will hurt you. Nevertheless, do not rejoice at

this, that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven” (Lk 10:17).

Our dedicated catechists are some of the most intrinsically motivated volunteers we could ever hope for. They are not in it for praise. This said, just about everyone appreciates an opportunity to “return with joy” to share stories of their encounters with students and parents. Catechetical leaders understand the importance of such gatherings to recognize efforts and accomplishments. When leaders express authentic words of appreciation in the context of our Christian mission—and not merely grand personal accomplishments—we build a sense of Christian connection, trust, and sacred interdependence. And we rejoice in the hope that our “names are written in heaven.”

Keep a roster of your catechists close at hand. Seek opportunities to write each one a quick affirmation note, always connecting the action to our catechetical mission. It can be as simple as “Thanks for staying with your student as he waited for his parents to pick him up. You embodied Matthew 28:20—‘I am with you always.’”

At Pentecost (or when the parish celebrates the sacrament of Confirmation), affirm ways in which catechists have activated the gifts and fruits of the Holy Spirit and how these have transformed students and families in the name of Christ.

Invite catechists to tell stories of encounters in Christ. Even a one-paragraph testimony or captioned photo posted to the parish website or on social media (with proper image-release permissions) can be a powerful form of recognition.

Engage

When your catechists feel engaged, they are more reliable and collaborative, and they become your best ministry ambassadors. Some methods of engagement include:

CONNECTIONS IN SPIRIT


When catechists entrust themselves to the Holy Spirit, they receive the grace to become instruments of the Spirit. So begin every meeting with a meaningful prayer experience. Provide catechists opportunities to share ways they discover Christ in the joys and struggles of life.

EFFECTIVE INTERNAL COMMUNICATIONS

Regular and effective communication motivates people. Its absence frustrates them. Be sure your catechists receive timely, relevant information. When appropriate, ask for their opinion on a pending decision such as the selection of textbooks or a parent meeting outline. Seek input for an upcoming catechist meeting agenda. And always manage your meetings well!

NURTURING A “WE” ENVIRONMENT

Next to the desire to share the Good News, catechists often volunteer for the social interaction. Provide opportunities, such as a retreat or community service activity, that will allow them to connect to each other in new ways.

In summary, when we apply the five principles for cultivating catechists, we build and nurture our community of catechists. In doing so, we build and nurture the Body of Christ. I invite you to continue to reflect upon these five principles, which keep us mindful of our shared mission to make disciples; provide clear parameters; empower others to share their gifts; show appreciation through meaningful recognition; and deepen Christ-centered relationships through meaningful engagement. 

Jayne Ragasa-Mondoy has more than 20 years of experience in corporate, educational, and pastoral settings. She holds a master’s degree in pastoral leadership from Chaminade University of Honolulu and is the director of religious education for the Diocese of Honolulu. She is author of *Cultivating Your Catechists: How to Recruit, Encourage, and Retain Successful Catechists*.



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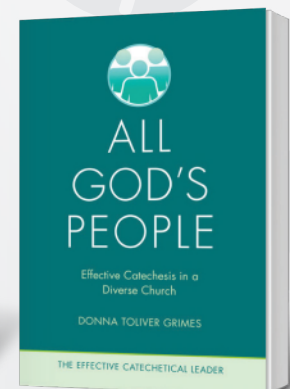
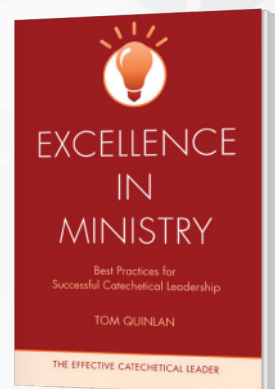
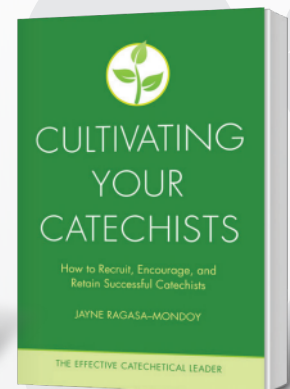
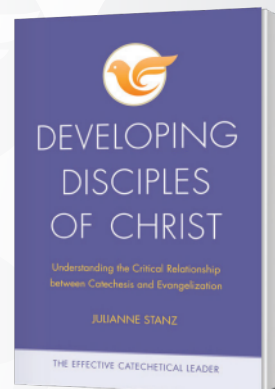
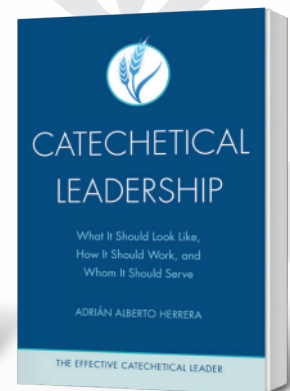
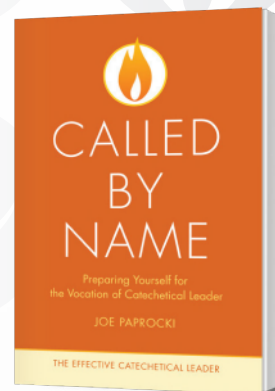
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Engaging Parents

MAUREEN P. PROVENCHER

The University of Notre Dame recently published a report from its study on American Catholic religious parenting (<https://churchlife-info.nd.edu/a-report-on-american-catholic-religious-parenting>). The findings outline today's parents as serving in three roles: sponsors, gatekeepers, and interpreters of the Catholic faith.

As *sponsors*, parents are the “carriers” of the faith to their children, deciding how much and how frequently their children will be exposed to it.

As *gatekeepers*, parents have control over the religious content to which their children are exposed. Parents decide whether the family will learn about and live the invitation of the liturgical seasons, participate in the Mass, commit to celebrating the sacrament of reconciliation, read and reflect on the Bible, or discover different ways of praying.

As *interpreters*, parents are role models and mentors to their children. They witness, for their children, how the faith that is believed is lived.

The report states, “Generally speaking, no religious influence besides mom and dad is positioned to demonstrate convincingly to children the desirability of practicing the Catholic faith,” adding: “If children do not ‘see’ Catholicism in the ‘face’ of their parents, they will likely never gain sufficient familiarity with it to commit to practicing the faith in the long run.”

What a huge opportunity for us to be ever more intentional about including parents in the catechesis of their children—not doing it for them, but equally with them.

The report emphasizes that having real relationships with parents is not optional but necessary, for the following reasons:

- ✱ The church's success with parents directly corresponds to our success with their children.
- ✱ The church's role is to invite, engage, support, and provide parents an experience of community—one of which they want to be a part.
- ✱ This effort will help to sustain the Catholic faith as valuable and viable for generations to come.
- ✱ This is an important investment in the church of now for that which will be.

This isn't about parents taking on yet another activity but about being aware of the opportunities for relationship in everyday places: on a walk in the neighborhood, in the checkout line at the grocery store, in the sidelines at a basketball practice, or while waiting around at Saturday morning dance class.

We've all heard the saying “We all do better when we all do better.” Imagine the effect on your parish community with these stronger relationships!

Five practical and effective strategies

1. BUILDING TRUST

We carry a passion and love of the Lord with us as we are sent out into the marketplace to share that passion for the Good News. When we are beyond church walls, we must be aware of the opportunities to connect with others so that our relationships go beyond Sunday and into everyday life.

We are bridge builders: we help people to connect the faith we believe and the lives we live. We help others to recognize God's presence and action in the ordinary moments of life, whether that's in the conversations in a checkout line, around the kitchen table, in the car on the way to soccer practice, or in the simple gifts of bread and wine offered during the Mass. All of it is holy.

When we are intentional about connecting with parents not just when they come to us but in the midst of their everyday lives, we show our care and support for them and their families. Such intention, care, and support builds trust and a closer connection, and it makes them feel that they matter just as much in the in-between times as when we gather.

2. JESUS DID IT!

While Jesus spent regular time in synagogues and in the temple, he also spent time with people in the places where they worked, shopped, and gathered with their friends and families. Jesus modeled how to live faith in secular places and at table in their homes, beyond synagogue walls.

If we believe we are vessels for God to work through and touch hearts, then we must go out into the world and allow God to do just that, through us. Jesus always sends us out. May his Spirit compel us to not be afraid in doing so.

3. WE ARE A CHURCH OF PEOPLE (NOT PROGRAMS)

Often we see great programs and events planned in the parish, only to have few people show up. It's common to hear, "But they're not coming to Mass!" Young people become engaged because of the connection they have to the people who gather and because they are made to feel that their presence and participation matter. Our programs and efforts exist because we are a people, not the other way around.

4. TOUCHING HEARTS

Parents play a necessary role in faith formation. They entrust their children to us to help them in the process of forming them in faith. It's a true partnership. Our evangelization is impactful when it is rooted in encountering and accompanying parents where and as they are, without judgment but with love. For Jesus, it was all about relationship and invitation. Imagine the impact on your parish community with a focus on relationship and invitation!

5. CATECHESIS IS ABOUT RELATIONSHIP

The foundation of all catechesis is relationship—relationship with Jesus. Having a relationship with Jesus always leads to a relationship with his people. Getting to know the parents of the children you accompany in faith strengthens their involvement and leaves them with a sense that their role, presence, and participation really matter.

Strengthening our communication

Communicating with parents invites them to become more engaged and to be successful in nurturing faith at home. Catechists who regularly communicate with parents after a lesson help the parents to be successful in unpacking what their child has experienced and learned and in building upon it. To fulfill their role as the primary catechists, parents require the support, encouragement, tools, and prayer from the faith community. Communicate regularly, using the methods parents prefer, to fortify your relationship and partnership and their success at home.

So, what could you communicate?

1. Share an insight or an experience the children had in the lesson.
2. Include the goals of the lesson so parents can expand upon them at home.
3. Remind parents to review the family piece of the lesson to build upon what the children learned, to pray, and to put their faith in action together.
4. Help parents to process their child's faith experiences. Provide some helpful questions, such as: "Tell me about the fun activity you did," or "Tell me about the Bible story you read and reflected on," or "What's one thing you learned about God today?" For older

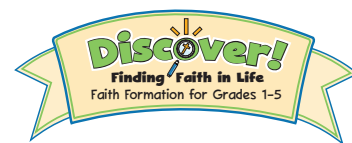
children, ask them questions using a scale of 1 to 10, such as, "On a scale of 1 to 10, how successful were you able to relate the topic to your life?" "Tell me about that '4' and why it isn't a higher number for you," or "Tell me about that '8' and what made the lesson so impactful," or "Tell me about that '5' and why the topic seemed mediocre to you."

5. For easy, click-and-go access, share links to any multimedia pieces that correlate with the lesson.
6. Got any current program needs? Don't forget to ask! The more specific you can be, the more likely you will receive just what you need.
7. Whenever you communicate with parents, thank them. Leave them with a word of encouragement. The good news is that they're entrusting us with their children to help them grow in the faith and that they, as parents, are trying.

Engaging parents

Here are some ways to invite parents to participate when you gather with the children:

1. Invite families to prepare the prayer table in the gathering space.



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2. Invite parents to lead the opening or closing prayer of the lesson from time to time.
3. Instead of parents just dropping off their children or waiting in the parking lot, how about inviting them in to pray with you?
4. Coordinate a team to greet families in the parking lot, at the front door of the building, and at the door of the gathering space.
5. Some parents are skilled presenters and speakers. They might have fun leading a learning activity with the children. Why not ask?
6. Ask one or two parents to set up the activities: gather the materials, prepare the space, and help the children navigate through the tasks.
7. Invite parents to share their stories of faith within the context of a lesson, when appropriate.
8. Lead songs—use the vocal and musical talents of parents or older siblings!
9. Invite a family to briefly present the life of a saint whose feast day is coming up.
 - ✦ Host a saints' festival or display! Each family can visually and creatively represent a saint at a given station. At each station, include an activity and a prayer that connects to the life and work of the saint.
 - ✦ A saints' wall could be created in the narthex of the church for All Saints' Day. Each family could pick their favorite saint and decorate a segment of the wall.
 - ✦ A special time of prayer around All Souls' Day could be planned for families to share photos of loved ones who have entered eternal life.
10. The liturgical season lessons are a fantastic way to engage parents in the gathered session to learn, pray, and grow together and to enjoy the take-home craft, a symbol of the season.

Inviting parents to be engaged is about providing them the opportunities to respond to their baptismal call to share in the life and mission of the church. We are not volunteers; we are disciples! We're in this together, and the efforts you put forth to truly partner with parents will only strengthen your parish community in its life, mission, and being in Christ Jesus.

Be creative! What other ways can you dream up that would engage parents and make them feel they are partners who truly belong? 

Maureen P. Provencher has professionally served in a variety of ministerial settings, from the Catholic school and parish, to the diocesan and national. She is currently a lead on the Ministry Care Team at St. Mary's Press, where she is eager to accompany leaders in ministry, and serves as a national trainer and speaker at various gatherings and conferences.



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NCCL: Time to Take a Good Hard Look

MARK MOGILKA

Perhaps you've heard the old curse that says "May you live in interesting times." Few would argue that the world and the church today are not in the midst of "interesting times."

Near-daily advances in technology and the digital world astound and amaze. We live with a challenging political landscape, environmental changes, and the constant movement of peoples. People are skeptical of institutions, and few are willing to volunteer, join organizations, or make commitments.

In the church we have all heard the challenging numbers concerning vocations, attendance at Mass, and sacramental participation. We have seen the impact of the sexual abuse crisis, bankruptcies, the church's ability to engage young people, the decline in participation in Catholic schools and religious education programs, and the linking, merging, or closing of parishes. Few would argue the need to embrace the Hispanicization of the church and address competing ecclesiologies. Add to the mix the competition the Catholic Church faces from various denominations in the religious marketplace, and we have named just a few of the challenges.

The impact of these "interesting times" has been felt by the National Conference for Catechetical Leadership and many national Catholic professional leadership organizations. In recent years several have seen declines in members and financial support.

In the midst of these "interesting times" we find the voice of Pope Francis, who calls us to renew our relationship with Jesus, to open ourselves anew to the action and power of the Holy Spirit, to renew the organizational structures of the church, and not to fall into the trap of "we have always done it this way."

Aware of these "opportunities for virtuous action," the board of NCCL this past summer decided it was time to take a good, hard look at itself. To do it well, it took the bold step of reaching beyond itself to seek proposals from several organizational consulting firms with expertise in Catholic organizational renewal. After reviewing several proposals, the board chose the professional expertise of Meitler.

Who is Meitler?

The tagline for Meitler is "Smarter Decisions—Stronger Mission." Meitler is a professional Catholic church management

consulting firm, founded in 1971, that has been collecting data, analyzing it, and following the guidance of the Holy Spirit in its efforts to assist thousands of Catholic organizations, dioceses, schools, and parishes in 43 states to develop plans for growth and to more effectively and efficiently carry out their missions.

As the lead consultant, I will be working closely with the leadership and membership of NCCL to accomplish the following goals:

1. to assess the current organizational structure and services of NCCL;
2. to review the current NCCL purpose, vision, and goals;
3. to study the effectiveness of the organization and make recommendations where needed;
4. to listen carefully to needs of the membership and various groups aligned with NCCL; and
5. to explore potential new models for helping NCCL carry out its mission.

How does this line up with the NCCL ends policies?

Section 2.0 of the NCCL Ends Policies notes the overall goal to "be aware of changing dynamics and landscapes in ministry." The sub-goals state that NCCL "will analyze the signs of the times through empirical data, experiential anecdotes, research and study" (2.1) and furthermore "will engage catechetical partners and/or relevant entities outside of the organization as a means to effect better practices, approaches, methodologies and frameworks" (2.2).

Working closely with the leadership of NCCL, the Meitler process will facilitate the accomplishment of these ends policies.

What is the Meitler process?

The first step in any Meitler organizational renewal or planning process is to meet with as many people as possible to listen, hear their stories, and collect information. Since mid-August, Meitler has listened to and observed board meetings; participated in planning meetings for the Representative Council meeting; and conducted interviews with board members and staff, former NCCL leaders, and NCCL partner organizations,



and groups. I will be attending the upcoming Representative Council meeting to observe and, more importantly, to listen to the needs, experiences, hopes, and dreams of those present.

With the help of the NCCL staff and executive director Margaret Matijasevic, we have already gathered several hundred pages of information and data, including information on:

1. Organizational structure, including the NCCL mission statement, bylaws, ends policies, and procedure manuals.
2. Staffing, including job descriptions, annual reviews, staffing patterns, and part-time, subcontracted services.
3. Memberships, including the various categories, partnerships, forums, and interest groups.
4. Membership trends over time.
5. Services provided, such as the annual convocation, *Catechetical Leader* magazine, website, email, blogs, publications, webinars, and advocacy.
6. Finances, including income, expenses over time, and projections for the future.
7. Communications systems with groups associated with NCCL: What do they receive and how does NCCL listen and respond to them?
8. Environmental scan: a look at what's happening in the world, the church, the fields of evangelization, and catechetics that are important to keep in mind.

In addition to looking at NCCL, the Meitler team will also conduct a study of comparable Catholic professional organizations. Meitler hopes to learn how other groups are organized to carry out their mission and how they deal with these “interesting times.”

During December and January, the Meitler team will share key data with members of the NCCL board, enter into a time of dialogue, and begin the early steps of a longer process of discernment as to what the information gathered might be calling the NCCL leadership to consider as it looks to the future.

Deeper listening to the experience, needs, and hopes of all members of NCCL is targeted for late January. Meitler, working with the board and staff, will develop a survey that will be distributed to all members. It is very important that as many people as possible take the time to respond to this online survey. The results will play an important part in the formulation of plans for the future of NCCL.

In the spring, the NCCL board and staff will receive the results of the membership survey, a report with Meitler's initial observations concerning NCCL, and Meitler's preliminary recommendations for potential action. It is hoped this information will act as a catalyst for a graced time of dialogue and discernment by the leadership of NCCL to prayerfully reflect on what God may be calling the organization to consider in the future. The fruit of this discernment will be the draft of a plan that will receive further consideration by the membership of NCCL at the annual convocation.

At the convocation in May, all members will have a chance to review and prayerfully consider what should be bold and innovative initiatives, grounded in the long history of NCCL, that will continue to support and grow the evangelical and catechetical ministry of the church.

Concluding thoughts

In closing, it might be helpful to consider the words of Pope Francis at the recent Amazon Synod. In his opening prayer, he asked God to give the participants “the Spirit of intelligence, truth, and peace so that they may know what is pleasing to You and have the courage to realize it.” He went on to urge participants to “pray much” then “reflect, dialogue, listen with humility, knowing that I do not know all.” He concluded his opening remarks by saying, “Pray for each other, have courage and please do not lose the sense of humor.” May these same sentiments apply to the process outlined here. (And remember to encourage one another to complete the January survey!)

Mark Mogilka is a senior consultant at Meitler and lives in Green Bay, Wisconsin. He is the coauthor of the book *Pastoring Multiple Parishes*. In 2017 he was awarded the Rev. Louis Luzbetak Award by Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate at Georgetown University for “exemplary Church research.” Contact him at mmogilka@meitler.com.

What Is Your Why?

LEISA ANSLINGER

Why do you do what you do? This may seem an unnecessary question, a “no-brainer.” Why do we do what we do? How would you answer this question right now, at this moment, in your life as a disciple of Jesus Christ, a person of ministry, a catechetical leader?

Recently, I had the privilege of spending two days with a group of Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA) leaders to explore the catechumenate as a process of conversion. We considered the ways RCIA team members and participants are themselves on a journey of conversion and how they can (and should) inspire parishioners to embrace conversion in Christ. With some fundamental foundations about the catechumenate established, primarily through the rite and other church documents, we began to think about what it means to lead others toward conversion and to consider the journey of conversion as a process of change. We used Dr. John Kotter’s change leadership framework. (See kotterinc.com/8-steps-process-for-leading-change/. Also see “It All Comes Down to Change,” *Catechetical Leader*, Oct. 2016, p. 30.) We considered what is already happening in the RCIA process and the parish upon which participants could build in order to effectively guide people and the parish toward this life of conversion.

How to inspire action

The people gathered were already engaged in good and healthy conversations when, just before lunch, we viewed Simon Sinek’s TED talk “How Great Leaders Inspire Action”

([ted.com/talks/simon_sinek_how_great_leaders_inspire_action?language=en](https://www.ted.com/talks/simon_sinek_how_great_leaders_inspire_action?language=en)). Suddenly, the discussions became animated, and for the next day and a half, participants used Sinek’s insights as a point of reference. Sinek was speaking to a group of business leaders, yet his message is for us as well—perhaps even more so, since our mission is of such great importance: “People don’t buy what you do; they buy *why* you do it” (*italics mine*).


Sinek explains that most leaders focus first on *what* they do, then consider *how* they do it, and finally describe *why* they do things their way. Their sequence is what-how-why. Sinek’s study of inspiring, effective leaders, however, shows that they reverse the order of these steps. They first become clear about their *why* and then move from the inside, the *why*, to the outside: why-how-what.

Sinek goes on to explain that his conviction about this is not simply the result of numerous case studies but is rooted in biology, brain science to be exact: “When we communicate from the outside in (what-how-why), people can understand vast amounts of complicated information like features and benefits and facts and figures. It just doesn’t drive behavior. When we communicate from the inside out, we’re talking directly to the part of the brain that controls behavior, and then we allow people to rationalize it with the tangible things we say and do.” People don’t buy what you do; they buy why you do it.

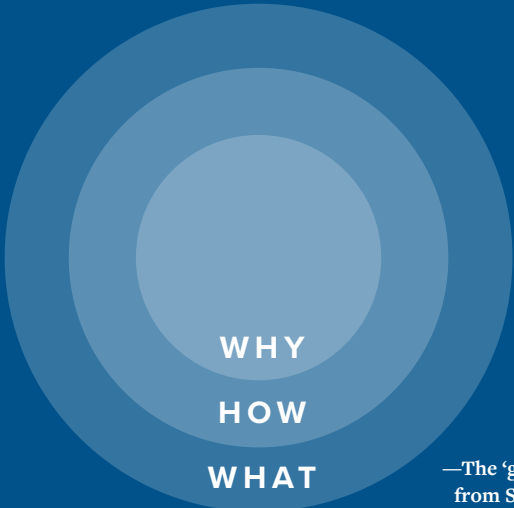
Is evangelization preceding your catechesis?

You may be reading this and thinking: Well, of course we know why we do what we do. We are fulfilling Christ’s mis-

sion in the world; leading others to the Lord; teaching them the faith. And yet, if we examine our practices in light of this “why” question, we may find that some our current practices place a priority on the “vast amounts of complicated information” before those we teach understand *why* this information is essential to the way they live. In the words of the catechetical documents, evangelization precedes catechesis. And yet, we know that in many instances, perhaps most, catechesis as it is currently structured precedes a real encounter with the Lord that provides the context—the why—for the information we are charged with communicating.

What would happen if you applied the why-how-what sequence to every aspect of catechetical ministry in your diocese or parish? Would some of your current practices change? Are there other things that you need to consider in order to firmly establish our “why”—the love of God, poured out in Jesus Christ, through and with the power of the Holy Spirit—in the hearts and minds of all you lead and serve? 

Leisa Anslinger is the associate director for pastoral life for the Archdiocese of Cincinnati. She is the author of *Impact*, a monthly resource to form people as disciples who live and grow as good stewards (catholiclifefandfaith.net/everyday-impact).



—The ‘golden circle’ from Simon Sinek

HOW GREAT LEADERS INSPIRE ACTION

How do you explain when things don’t go as we assume? Or better, how do you explain when others are able to achieve things that defy all of the assumptions?...

As it turns out, there’s a pattern. As it turns out, all the great inspiring leaders and organizations in the world, whether it’s Apple or Martin Luther King or the Wright brothers, they all think, act and communicate the exact same way. And it’s the complete opposite to everyone else. All I did was codify it, and it’s probably the world’s simplest idea. I call it the golden circle.

Why? How? What? This little idea explains why some organizations and some leaders are able to inspire where others aren’t. Let me define the terms really quickly. Every single person, every single organization on the planet knows what they do, 100 percent. Some know how they do it, whether you call it your differentiated value proposition or your proprietary process or your USP. But very, very few people or organizations know why they do what they do. And by “why” I don’t mean “to make a profit.” That’s a result. It’s always a result. By “why,” I mean: What’s your purpose? What’s your cause? What’s your belief? Why does your organization exist? Why do you get out of bed in the morning? And why should anyone care?

—Simon Sinek, TEDx Puget Sound





At the Center: An Adult-Centered Church

JANET SCHAEFFLER, OP

In the midst of all our efforts to encourage, foster, and provide lifelong learning, let's pause and remember some essentials. What is adult faith formation? What difference does it (or should it) make?

In the Gospel of Luke we read: "Were not our hearts burning within us while he spoke to us on the way and opened the scriptures to us?"

These words continue to ring out today in our parishes; our Catholics are calling on the church to quench their longing for a deepened living of the faith. The catechesis received as children simply isn't enough to help us continue to live the faith as adults in our world of today.

We are called to active participation

Since the Second Vatican Council, the church has sought to highlight and call forth the significant role of the laity not as spectators but as active participants—the role we committed ourselves to at baptism. The church is calling us to fully live our baptismal calling through a deeper understanding and appreciation of the faith, active participation, and committed discipleship.

The foundation of this active participation and committed discipleship lies in ongoing learning and growth, the opportunities that adult faith formation can provide. Adult faith formation is not just another program but an attitude or a vision that is lived out daily. Formation is key; formation does not take place just by people having knowledge in their head.

What really do we mean when we talk about adult faith formation? Adult learning is happening all the time: through the media, casual conversations, traveling, and so on. Significant learning happens in everyday life moments, especially during transition times.

Formation in the faith is happening all the time, including throughout parish life. We learn through our participation in liturgy with its rich symbolism, images, and rituals. We learn when we welcome and support catechumens in the RCIA. We learn about ourselves and relationships when we initiate an annulment process. Understandings of church sharpen as we observe who is or is not on a parish staff, who participates in the decision-making processes, and what is or is not in the

parish bulletin. The total experience of our everyday parish life—whenever we encounter it—influences the quality of our adult learning.

Since the 1960s, our parishes have directed financial and human resources toward the ministry of adult faith formation, which has strengthened thousands of our Catholic sisters and brothers. Since the end of the Second Vatican Council, the church has officially published no fewer than eight major documents calling for adults to be the center of the church's educational mission. These documents emphasize that adult faith formation must be considered the chief form of catechesis.

What are your adult faith formation goals?

The guiding document for the United States, *Our Hearts Were Burning within Us*, emphasizes, in the first goal for adult faith formation, that ongoing formation helps the baptized to consciously grow in the life of Christ through experience, reflection, prayer, and study.

The other two goals for adult formation are to form "active members of the Church" and to "prepare adults to act as disciples in mission to the world."


These goals are achieved through information and formation for the sake of transformation. We who are baptized are called to transformation, growing more and more into the people God created us to be. Committed to personal transformation, we will then be witnesses of Christ, making a difference in the world. The overarching goal of adult faith formation is a sense of mission rather than just the enhancing of membership.

All adult formation invites people to make the connection between faith and life. All adult faith formation needs to answer the "so what?" question. What does this really have to do with my everyday life? With the world in which I live? With the world who needs the compassion, peace, and healing of our God?

Some of the benefits and riches of adult faith formation—for each adult and for an adult-centered parish—are:

- ★ leading people to a deeper understanding of their relationship with God and the call to live the Gospel message to its fullest

- * fostering spiritual growth and nourishing ongoing conversion
- * nurturing adults in their faith, so that through their deepened understanding, they can make the community of faith stronger
- * supporting people in making adult decisions that will respond to the challenges of faith in contemporary society
- * equipping people to compassionately serve and to be change agents, to participate in building the reign of God right now—a world of respect, equality, and peace

Supported by church teaching, adult faith formation is at the center of the church’s educational mission: a call for information and formation for the sake of transformation. We are transformed so that we might continually go forth to transform the world. 

Janet Schaeffler, OP, former director of adult faith formation for the archdiocese of Detroit, leads days of reflection and retreats, parish missions, and workshops, and facilitates online courses. An author of several books and hundreds of articles, she also created and publishes *GEMS*, a monthly newsletter from an ongoing international best practices study on adult formation.

THE CHIEF FORM OF CATECHESIS

In their 1972 document *To Teach as Jesus Did*, the United States Bishops confirmed that adult catechesis is “situated not at the periphery of the Church’s educational mission but at its center.” The *General Directory for Catechesis* issued by the Vatican in 1997 also affirms that “catechesis for adults must be considered the chief form of catechesis.”

In the same way, our *National Directory for Catechesis*, published in 2005, continues the strong imperative for the centrality of adult faith formation: “The catechetical formation of adults is essential for the Church to carry out the commission given the apostles by Christ” (87).

In 1999 came a landmark document for the US church. The United States Bishops published *Our Hearts Were Burning within Us: A Pastoral Plan for Adult Faith Formation in the United States*. Along with its *Leader’s Guide*, this indispensable tool and resource is a vision as well as a strategy for adult faith formation in our parishes and dioceses across the country.

Adult Faith Formation ...

- * must be “the central task in (this) catechetical enterprise” (#5)
- * must be positioned “at the heart of our catechetical vision and practice” (#6)
- * “is always needed and must be a priority in the Church’s catechetical ministry” (#13)
- * “must be considered the chief form of catechesis” (#13)
- * “should serve as the point of reference for catechesis of other age groups” (#41)
- * “must be situated not at the periphery of the Church’s educational mission but at its center” (#42)


The Challenges

- * “While most Catholic parishes place a high priority on the faith formation of children and youth, far fewer treat adult faith formation as a priority. This choice is made in parish staffing decisions, job descriptions, budgets, and parishioner expectations.” (#43)
- * “We are well aware that placing ongoing adult faith formation at the forefront of our catechetical planning and activity will mean real change in emphasis and priorities.” (#14)
- * “In refocusing our catechetical priorities, we will all need to discover new ways of thinking and acting.” (#14)

Hopes and Promises

- * “As bishops, we will walk this journey of discovery with you.” (#15)
- * “Every Church ministry will be energized through a dynamic ministry of adult catechesis.” (#39)

Questions for Reflection and Conversation

1. Name an experience, event, or situation that helped you to deepen your faith. What was it about this that made an impact on you, that helped you to learn or grow?
2. Do the goals, schedules, budget, Sunday bulletin, and other aspects of our parish reflect the church documents that say that adult faith formation is “at the center of the Church’s educational mission”? If not, where do we start?
3. If someone reviewed the opportunities for adult faith formation in our parish, what might they understand the reason for adult faith formation to be?
4. Which of our adult faith formation opportunities or activities within our parish life help parishioners connect faith and life?
5. How has our parish life changed as a result of adult faith formation? What have been the benefits of adult faith formation in our parish? 

Go Out and Be Present

KYLE S. TURNER

Sometimes life throws you unexpected curveballs! This certainly was the case for me recently. In late August, Regis University was the victim of a malicious cyberattack. In recent months, a number of universities, municipalities, and governmental organizations have been attacked in similar ways, a threat all too common in our technology-reliant world.

As soon as the attack was detected, all of Regis's computer systems were immediately shut down, hoping to ward off any exacerbation of the virus. This happened a few hours before the start of new student orientation and four days prior to the start of classes. This was not the advent of a new year that we were expecting!

Part of the collateral damage in our university's tech crisis was the original column that I was crafting to be in this current issue. With our tech outage came absolutely zero access to any computer files that were saved on local Regis computers or shared network drives. My column, in process but not yet finished, was saved on my Regis computer ... inaccessible to be completed ... potentially lost for good.

What to do when the tech turns off

My plan to continue a reflection on how the messages expressed in Pope Francis's encyclical "Gaudete et Exsultate" relate to campus ministry was thwarted, for I had made the unfortunate mistake of not backing up my article in another place. My computer was quarantined; my article was unavailable.

This experience opened a door to reflect upon the experience of beginning a school year in campus ministry as though we were taken back to the mid-1980s. No computers. No email. Our office website was a blank slate, literally, and the shared drive where our team files were stored was inaccessible for the foreseeable future.

This meant no access to files for retreats, liturgies, schedules ... nada. Wi-Fi was not even available on campus for the first week and a half of the new school year. As a ministry team, we were starting from scratch to try to engage, evangelize, and



ultimately attempt to catechize new and returning students on campus, ultimately to share the Good News with them.

Since my original article was inaccessible to me, this experience gave me the chance to reflect on what my campus ministry team and I were experiencing during our technological crisis. What we had experienced as a university was an evil attack upon our community. How we ought to respond as a ministry team was the primary question at the forefront of our consciousness in those early days of the semester.

The first week of classes was a surreal experience for those of us who have been accustomed to having technological assistance in our ministerial work. The shock of it all, however, did not prevent us from being present to students as they arrived on campus to begin classes. We knew that our first priority was to be a hospitable presence to all who were arriving on campus, whether seniors, grad students, or first-year students ready to take on the world.


Getting back to basics

Our team helped in handing out paper schedules to students on the first couple of days of classes. Daily liturgies resumed so that members of the community could break open the Word and share in Sacrament together. Plans for marketing our early-in-the-year retreats, Bible studies, RCIA, and the upcoming Mass of the Holy Spirit had to shift from relying on our departmental website and email distribution lists to crafting hand-drawn posters to be placed around campus and relying on student leaders to spread news via word of mouth.

Luckily, we still had access to our social media accounts through our cell phones, so we did have one technological avenue to utilize for connecting with students. Through all of this, which at times felt close to the edge of turmoil, our staff remained positive and determined to remain connected with the students whom we are called to serve.

It meant getting away from our desks and computers and going out into the heart of the campus to meet more students face-to-face and to make direct connections in our evangelization efforts.

At the heart of our energies for connecting with students, staff, and faculty on campus during the first few weeks of the new school year was a renewed sense of meeting each person eye-to-eye. We took cues from Jesus's own approach to engaging others by trying to be fully present to each and every individual we had the opportunity to encounter.

How might you approach your ministry if faced with a similar technological conundrum? What are some steps of preparedness that you can take to safeguard access to data that you might need to fully engage in your ministry? From my experience ... make sure to have multiple backups of your work available! 

Kyle S. Turner, MA, STM, is the director of university ministry at Regis University in Denver. He lives in Lakewood, Colorado, with his wife, Kristin, and two young daughters, Abigail Hope and Siena Grace. Contact him at ktturner005@regis.edu.

