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CATECHETICAL  
LEADER



# IMAGINE!

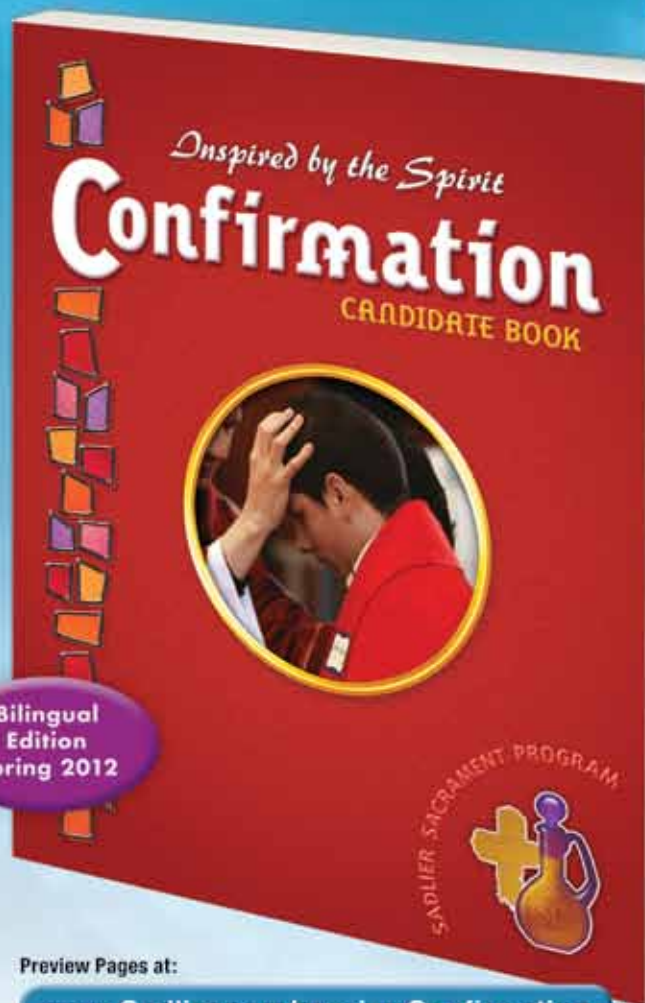
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in Eucharist Formation

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Called to Discipleship

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# SOME INSIGHT ABOUT HOW THE BOARD WORKS

Anne Roat



## National Conference For Catechetical Leadership

Dear NCCL Members,



I have been asked by a number of NCCL members about the work of your board of directors. In some ways, the normal operations of the board are not well known to the larger membership. When the present slate was elected, we promised to keep you up-to-date with everything we did and to hold ourselves accountable to our members. Our secretary, Joanie McKeown, has helped by posting monthly highlights of our meetings on the NCCL website. However, I thought it might be beneficial to give you some insights into what a typical monthly board meeting encompasses.

Have you ever tried to get ten extremely busy people together in one location 12 times a year? Impossible? Yes and no. Board members live in nine different states that span three time zones. We meet in person three times a year and schedule monthly meetings in between using a web-based service called "Gotomeeting." We set our year's-worth of meeting dates at our June/July face-to-face board meeting. In order to get all the business of the conference accomplished each month, we set aside a two-hour block of time and normally use every minute of it.

In many ways, the NCCL Board of Directors' meetings look like a meeting of any other organization. One of the board members leads an opening prayer, and then we spend a couple of minutes doing personal and professional updates. This is an important part of our meeting because it affords us the opportunity to hear how one another is doing and allows ten individuals to connect and offer support despite the fact that we are not in the same room together.

Next, it is time to get down to the business of the conference. Minutes of the last meeting are approved, and the highlights are prepared for posting on the website. Our treasurer, Kathy Kleinlein, leads the discussion on the monthly finance report. The report is sent to the

board a couple of weeks prior to the meeting so that we have a chance to review the figures and see if we have any questions. Since the board has a fiduciary responsibility to NCCL, this portion of the meeting is taken very seriously. Our accountant and bookkeeper have done a wonderful job of recasting the finance reports and helping the board receive the needed fiscal information.

Both the executive director and the president give reports to the board. Lee Nagel sends the board a written report prior to the meeting. He details contacts he has had with our provinces and partner organizations. He also gives the board an update on current NCCL projects. As president, I provide the board with an update on the workings of all our committees—how they are functioning, projects they are undertaking, and items that need board input. I also provide the board a report on any task that I have been working on for NCCL.

The last portion of the meeting involves reviewing old business—the strategic plan, input on Rep Council meetings, forums, etc. New business is next, and that can be anything that the executive director, president, committee, or partner organization brings to the attention of the board of directors. By this time, I usually glance at my watch and note that almost two hours have flown past and I hurry to discuss a few items for our next meeting and our face-to-face meetings. Finally, we all rush off to our next meeting!

Your NCCL Board of Directors serves as trustees of the Conference and constitutes its chief governing body. They set and monitor the mission and strategic direction of the Conference. Each member of the board of directors considers it an honor and privilege to serve you, our members. Thank you for allowing us to represent you and the ministry of catechesis in the United States!

God bless,

Anne

President, NCCL

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# LEGACY, LEARNING, AND LIVING

Leland Nagel



I am writing this in the first week of October. We've celebrated the life of St. Francis and mourned the death of Steve Jobs. The tributes to the legacy of Mr. Jobs are many. Thankfully my introduction to the computer was on a Mac. However, in full disclosure, I still don't own an iPod, an iPhone, or an iPad. These instruments may go down as Steve Jobs' legacy, but to me his legacy is found in the words he spoke back in 2005 during the commencement address for Stanford University that year.

It isn't so much *what* he said about living, but *how* he said it. He told three stories, and because of those stories, I still remember his closing line: "Stay hungry! Stay foolish! And have the courage to follow your heart and intuition; they somehow know what you already want to become." These words connected with Blaise Pascal's claim that "there is a God-shaped hole in the heart of every man [sic], which cannot be filled by any created thing, but only by God the Creator." It also brought me face to face with the writings of Parker Palmer in his book, *Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation*. Palmer invites us to listen to the inner teacher and follow its leadings toward a sense of meaning and purpose. "Vocation does not come from willfulness, no matter how noble one's intentions." Palmer shows that vocation is not a goal to be achieved but rather a gift to be received.

Every time I hear of an unwed mother who chooses to give that child up for adoption because she wants the best for her child, I will think of the legacy of Steve Jobs. Every time a couple, awakened by a phone call, agrees to parent a child with love and care, I will remember the heritage of Steve Jobs. Every time, I watch a parent sacrifice for their child, give the child another chance, or provide whatever is necessary for a dream to become a reality, I will remember the inheritance Steve Jobs received in order to create a legacy. Steve Jobs gratefully received his vocation.

It's now January, 2012, and three months have passed. We've celebrated the lives of the saints and all the souls who have passed through this life and no longer live on this earth. Hopefully, we've learned something about living from those

souls we personally encountered and received wisdom and insights from the legacy of those we have only read about, such as the saints for which we were named.

Another liturgical year ended and a new one began with the proclamation of the revised edition of the *Roman Missal*. We celebrated Thanksgiving with friends and relatives, sang carols for neighbors and strangers, gave gifts to family and others in need, and set up a crèche, one of the legacies of St. Francis. Another calendar year came to a close, and we began with the proclamation of our resolutions for the New Year.

Wait a minute. Let's take stock of the last three months.

- ★ Who has died?
- ★ What did you learn from them?
- ★ What is the legacy you would like to leave?

Your answers are a good start in planning for Lent 2012. For Eastern Rite Catholics, Lent will start on Clean Monday, February 27, while for us Romans, Ash Wednesday begins on Washington's birthday, and "I cannot tell a lie," so remember, "you are dust and to dust you will return." In one sense, Lent is about learning from our living in order to create a legacy as a disciple of Jesus.

What have you learned about prayer, fasting, and almsgiving?

In your daily living, how can prayer shape your legacy, how can fasting assist you in deepening your relationship with Jesus, and how can almsgiving enhance your inheritance? What are three temptations that will challenge your resolve to be worthy?

Consider gathering three stories unique to you that will guide your learning and assist you in your living and secure your legacy. Perhaps one may be from Scripture, another with reference to those who loved you, and the last about those whom you loved. Remember, "sometimes a person needs a story more than he needs food" (Barry Lopez, *Crow and Weasel*). Maybe, just maybe, in recalling these stories, you will affirm the vocation you received. After all, "[t]he place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet" (Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Seeker's ABC*). Then, and only then, will the God-shaped hole in your heart be filled with the right piece, the God the Creator piece. ■

*Consider gathering three stories unique to you that will guide your learning and assist you in your living and secure your legacy.*

# Imagine Making Disciples of all Nations

Sara Blauvelt



Pope Benedict XVI's formation of a pontifical council for new evangelization provides the opportunity for those involved in catechesis to revisit, or perhaps visit for the first time, the relationship between catechesis and evangelization. This relationship is certainly not new. In *Catechesi Tradendae*, Pope John

Paul II describes catechesis as a moment—"a very remarkable one—in the whole process of evangelization" (18). In reality this moment is a life-long journey, which should permeate every aspect of Christian life. With attention to the new evangelization, Pope Benedict is regenerating efforts to transform culture from within and to bring to the fore the awareness of evangelization as the very heart of the church.

The pope emphasizes

the specific task of promoting a renewed evangelization in countries where the first proclamation of the faith already resounded, and where Churches are present of ancient foundation, but which are going through a progressive secularization of society and a sort of 'eclipse of the sense of God....'<sup>1</sup>

It is here that catechists, and for that matter, all baptized Catholics, must view themselves as not merely cooperating in evangelization, but rather as taking an active role: assuming their mandate from Christ to go and make disciples. The implications of this role necessitate the proclamation of the life and redemptive death of Jesus in a manner that leads to authentic conversion. Conversion of heart has implications that reach far beyond the traditional notion of evangelization: bringing the gospel to foreign lands. This is a radical understanding of evangelization—evangelization for everyone, by everyone, *and* as a life-long transformative process. Determining how to encourage this sensibility is often the root of the difficulty facing those who are called to evangelize.

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*A variety of languages  
should be employed  
in nurturing  
Catholic imagination.*

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## IMAGINATION IS A SOURCE FOR CONVERSION

Cultivating a religious imagination offers a strategy for development of a foundation that fosters conversion and nurtures a personal relationship with Jesus. A reawakening and nurturing of the Catholic imagination as a rich source for conversion and transformation is indispensable not only for those propagating the faith, but also for those to whom they evangelize. Imagination allows one to see possibilities and make decisions in light of possibilities.

Imagination is not to be confused with the imaginary, which tends toward fantasy. Rather, imagination is founded on personal experience, which includes life in a community of faith that is embedded within a particular culture. Individuals and cultures draw upon categories of memories, religious beliefs, experiences, tales, and traditions that help them to develop an understanding and formulate an approach to reality. Fostering a distinctly Catholic imagination—that unique world filled with symbols, images, smells, sounds, rituals, and traditions common to all Catholics—can be a powerful tool in catechesis and evangelization.

A variety of languages should be employed in nurturing Catholic imagination. Words are a powerful force in forming memories, which the imagination then retrieves and builds upon. However, ritual language also includes actions, gestures, people, feelings, music, and art. These languages do not function independently of one another; instead they edify and expand on each other, evoking many senses to create a depth and richness in the experience. Once imagination has been thus engaged, the vision of what was once ordinary, or seen as flat, is now seen through a new orientation: a horizon that sees beyond to the extraordinary.

Catholic imagination operates through the languages of creation, symbol, Scripture, Tradition, narrative art, and ritual. Through these languages, one encounters mystery and the understanding that there is something beyond which can be seen. It is the Incarnation that gives access to God through

<sup>1</sup> "Homily at Vespers for Sts. Peter and Paul," 2010, [tinyurl.com/6b55xdj](http://tinyurl.com/6b55xdj).



Christ, the church, and the sacraments. Such a sacramental worldview is not only a central theological principle of Catholicism, it is essential to the Catholic imagination. It supports the elements of Catholic culture and is fundamental in the sacraments. Sacramentality is not limited to worship but encompasses a broader worldview that sees the potential for the sacred in all created matter.

## CREATION

In creation, God's incarnate and redemptive work is seen. The glory of God is made manifest in creation; nature extols God's love for humanity. In his letter to the Romans, St. Paul says that through creation, God can be known: "For what can be known about God is plain to them because God has shown it to them. Since the creation of the world, his invisible nature, namely, his eternal power and deity, has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made" (Rom 1:19-20).

## SYMBOLS OF FAITH

By virtue of the very nature of humanity, symbols (and sacraments) are necessary to mediate the encounter with the divine. A primary instrument in the re-awakening of imagination is exploration of the rich meaning that symbols convey. A sacramental worldview allows the faithful to make the connection between the commonplace items that God uses to grace the moments of life—water, bread, wine, oil, and fire—with the liturgy the faithful celebrate and the life they lead. Symbols of faith are critical to the Catholic belief; they undergird the worship system of the church. Symbols must be integrated into life as well as worship. However, for a symbol to be effective, it is necessary to have a basic understanding of the symbol, its qualities and nature. It is important to remember that symbols convey more than meaning; they touch the heart, stir up emotions. They make reality present and allow participa-

tion between humanity and divinity. A well-tutored Catholic imagination correlates life events within a given culture with the symbols of faith.

## THE STORY OF SALVATION—SACRED SCRIPTURE AS SYMBOL

Sacred Scripture is acknowledged as a privileged source of revelation across generations. By meditative reflection on the Word, one is able to see beyond the story, placing oneself in the narrative and at the same time bringing the narrative into the present world. This reflective, contemplative stance allows Sacred Scripture to be a paramount and multifaceted symbol of the church. In fostering Catholic imagination, the Word is treated not as merely a set of historical documents, but as a story at the heart of every person and culture.

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*In fostering Catholic imagination, the Word is treated not as merely a set of historical documents, but as a story at the heart of every person and culture.*

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## TRADITION—PRACTICES OF THE CHRISTIAN LIFE

The word "tradition" is a derivative of *tradita* (things passed on). Tradition is a process of inducting individuals into a community by participation in the practices of the community. According to the Second Vatican Council document *Dei Verbum*, tradition represents the whole of the church: the life, worship and doctrine, elements, and symbols are identified as distinctly Catholic. Through the centuries, the church has learned that one of the most effective means of shaping a Christian is to shape his or her behavior and attitudes by living the Christian life and being a witness in deed and word. The General Directory for Catechesis captures this understanding: "Conversion to Jesus Christ implies walking in his footsteps. Catechesis must, therefore transmit to the disciples the attitude of the Master himself" (53). This training, "walking in his footsteps," is fundamentally a passing on of Tradition primarily through cultivation of and attention to Christian practices and by acknowledging the celebration of liturgy as of central importance to both the community and the individual.

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In shared experiences of celebration and life, the imagination is being nurtured and formed.

### NARRATIVE—HUMAN POSSIBILITY EXPLORED

Catholicism is steeped in stories, pre-eminently the story of Salvation, but also the lives of saints and the stories of martyrs and missionaries who lived and died for Christ. Storytelling is not merely an exercise in re-telling tales of the past; it is a means of sparking the imagination and opening the mind to new possibilities and outcomes. Story, through its multitude of genres, provides images and memories for the imagination to draw upon as it journeys toward God. It is in experiencing stories, journeys, and images presented in literature that the imagination is able to create images that foster a spiritual journey on the road to conversion.

### ART—GIVING SHAPE TO IMAGINATION

Art is the visual expression of the imagination at work. Through the centuries, religious art has proliferated as a response to the evocative nature of Jesus' teaching. Through his use of highly imaginative language, Jesus painted images in his stories. The Word inspired visual representations "bringing to life," as it were, the images created through the words of Jesus.

In the centuries where few were literate, art played a primary role in forming the Catholic imagination through the vast mediums of art including paintings, stained glass, and sculpture. Today, art still contributes heavily to imagination. Looking at a crucifix can often speak more clearly than simply hearing the word crucifix. The image provides the symbol that allows the heart (and mind) to see more deeply to the pain and love that the "crucifix" carries. Stained glass offers another media of depicting religious images. The light that shines through and illuminates the glass brings the image to life and provides an effective metaphor for seeing the invisible beyond.

### NURTURING FRUITFUL IMAGINATION

Missionary discipleship has always presented a daunting task as it takes one into the unknown, the unfamiliar, and the uncertain. Imagination plays a role in strengthening the disciple, for it is not only a tool for evangelizing others, but of evangelizing self. It is through one's own imagination that he or she may see him or herself as a disciple.

Like evangelization and catechesis, imagination is a dynamic, on-going process. As such, imagination should be nurtured

in a strategic manner, mindful that strategic does not imply static. Engaging imagination in evangelization and catechesis requires flexibility and openness; at the same time, it must be rooted in Christ. Fostering imagination requires knowledge of

doctrine and faithfulness to Tradition. The symbols used in liturgical celebrations, particularly those common to life—water, bread, wine, oil, fire—should be used generously. Reflective and repetitious use of symbols in liturgy allows the symbols to be appropriated and their deeper meaning apprehended and integrated into daily living.

Finally, evangelists and catechists must understand themselves as mystagogues.

As such, they serve as guides for imagination, helping the individual or culture to reassemble fragmentary memories into a meaningful Catholic belief system. When founded in the paschal mystery, mystagogy can foster imagination. Mystagogy should be appropriate to the community, that is the ecclesial, social, and political concerns of the hearers. Imaginative mystagogy, understood as a life-long process aided by the promptings of the Holy Spirit, enables it to be an element of all evangelizing and catechetical efforts.

Imagination, if used in a constructive manner, makes faith possible. The dynamic nature of the imaginative process enables it to be an effective ministerial tool in evangelization and catechesis. Experiences of Catholic ritual, reflection upon Scripture, generous encounters with Catholic faith symbols, modeling a Christian life, immersion in Catholic Tradition, and mystagogy nurture a Catholic imagination, making transformation possible. Individuals whose imaginations are thus well-formed will be strengthened in their convictions to profess their belief with joy. Centering efforts in biblical and historical contexts and drawing upon the symbols of faith as well as traditional ritual elements will make the connection between the liturgy lived and life lived apparent. At the heart of this is a firmly rooted sacramental worldview, which enables the Catholic imagination to flourish in the secular as well as the sacred world, thus transforming individuals and cultures from within. ■

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# CATECHETICAL UPDATE

A publication of the National Conference for Catechetical Leadership



## CALLED TO DISCIPLESHIP

Janet Schaeffler, OP



As catechetical leaders, at times we experience frustration when some families show up only for those programs and grade levels that correspond with sacramental celebrations. Lately there's a question that keeps popping up in the back of my mind: are we "telling" them that? Do we give them the idea that

the sacramental times are really what *are* most important? Are we reinforcing their belief? Do our practices, programs, and procedures give this message?

The Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults process has reinforced for us the reality that mystagogy is what it's all about: we are never finished. The renewal of the sacraments called for in Vatican II reminds us that sacraments are not ends in themselves. The Christian life is about discipleship; it is about carrying out the mission of Jesus in our everyday lives, in our

church, and our world. Sacraments are the celebration times in everyday life that call us to and empower us for this discipleship. Sacraments are not one-time "things" that are over and done with once they are celebrated; sacraments are not things "to get." Sacraments equip us, empower us, and sustain us for ministry, for discipleship.

Do the children, youth, adults, and families always recognize and understand that? We know that we believe it and try to communicate it. Yet, at times, do our practices, procedures, and programs "say" something else: that "getting the sacrament" is what matters?

In the last 25 years, the catechetical ministry in the United States has done a phenomenal job of creating intensive sacramental programs. That is something that should be celebrated—and continued.

At the same time, we always need to look at the flip side of things (often that tells us what we still need to do). Because we have designed wonderful sacramental programs, have we subtly told parents that getting their children there for sacraments is what it's all about? That's not what we were saying, but is that what they heard?

When do you have the most communication and interaction with parents? During sacramental years—or all the time?

What information and activities are covered in your parish Sunday bulletin? Sacramental program activities—or activities from all age groups?

When do you remind the parents that they are the primary educators in faith formation for their children? During sacramental years—or all the time?

Are we—subtly and unknowingly—reinforcing the erroneous belief of “get the sacraments and then we're done” because our sacramental programs are so extensive, well-organized, and comprehensive?

The answer, of course, is not to diminish or decrease in any way the faith-filled programs of sacrament preparation. Are there things we can be doing (or not doing) within our parishes, faith formation programs, and sacramental processes to enable people to see that we are called to a life of discipleship, not only a life of “getting sacraments?”

#### THINGS TO DO WITHIN FAITH FORMATION PROGRAMS

\* What happens during sacramental times to involve the parents and families? Do we have parent meetings, family home activities, parent-child retreats, special liturgies and prayer services and service opportunities? Is it possible to incorporate these worthwhile methods and activities within all age levels, not just the sacramental programs?

\* Children and families belong to the parish, not just to a religious education program or a school or only to “this year's first Communion class.” All that we do in faith formation programs and schools should incorporate children (and their families) into the life of the parish, helping them to experience that their faith is about much more than just “going to class,” more than just learning in an academic setting, more than only getting a sacrament. This participation in the life of the parish—in all its aspects, activities, and ministries—will hopefully remind them that the Christian lifestyle is about being disciples everyday of their lives.

\* Frequently, when there is discussion at the parish leadership levels (faith formation committee, school board, education commission, committees working with home-schooling families, parish pastoral council, etc.) regarding the faith formation programs for children, they only center on the sacramental years. This is an ideal time to stretch the thinking. Broaden the discussion to look at what happens after the celebration of sacraments. Help everyone to see that all ages, each year of faith formation, is important. Remind them that the Christian life is about discipleship—the living out of what the sacraments call us to do.

\* Communicate with parents all the time (not just at sacramental times) in as many ways as possible: phone calls, home visits, letters, articles in the bulletin, newsletters, parent meetings, workshops, family celebrations, prayer times.

\* Empower families to be homes of prayer—always. Sacramental years are not the only time of family prayer and study. Can we give them as many ideas for family rituals and discussions each year as

we do during the sacramental years?

\* When the “person in the pew” reads the Sunday bulletin, what do they find out about the parish's program for faith formation with the younger members of the community? Do they only read about the activities of the sacramental programs, or are the activities and projects of every age level featured on a regular basis?

#### THINGS TO DO WITHIN THE PROGRAMS OF SACRAMENT PREPARATION

\* Think about the language that we use to talk about the celebration of sacraments. (Language, very subtly, but powerfully, educates.) Sacraments are not “things” we get. They are celebrations; they are actions of the community. They empower us to live our lives in a different way. We celebrate sacraments; we don't just:

\* “get confirmed” (That sounds very passive.)

\* “receive Communion” (That doesn't begin to address the mystery and challenge of being the Body of Christ.)

\* “make reconciliation” (That sounds over and done with.)

All of the language we use needs to stress the reality of sacraments as calls to discipleship and as actions: participative and ongoing. We don't get or receive sacraments; we celebrate

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*When do you remind the parents that they are the primary educators in faith formation for their children? During sacramental years—or all the time?*

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them and the celebration affects (or should affect) our lives forever.

✱ During sacramental preparation times, do all you can to minister to/involve the entire family. The whole family, in one sense, is the candidate for the sacrament, not just the one child. This will illustrate for the family that sacraments aren't the end of things; they are the empowerment to our everyday, on-going call.

✱ Often people see the sacramental programs as something very different than the rest of the catechetical program. They don't see a connection. The sacraments are in this "box" and have no relationship to the rest of faith formation. All that we do in catechesis is about sacramental living: about baptismal, reconciling, or eucharistic living, for example. If we are studying about the importance of Jesus in our lives, about ways to pray, about ways to serve, we are "studying" confirmation (or Eucharist or reconciliation, etc.). The sacraments are about living our Christian commitment in every part of our lives; they're about Christian Catholic living. To study about the sacraments, we study about Catholic living. When studying about Catholic living, we are studying about the realities we say we want to live when we ask to celebrate the sacraments. All that we say and do needs to remind parents and young people of this—it's not just about getting a sacrament over and done with.

✱ Involve the whole parish as much as possible with the sacramental candidates. Hopefully, this involvement of faith-filled, active Catholics with the candidates and their families will "say" that this is about everyday life, not just about getting something "done" because it's the year to do it. The service component of many sacramental programs would be an example of this. Do we just plan opportunities for the sacramental candidates, or do they participate in the parish service outreach? Do they join in service with their parents, sponsors, families, or older members of their parish community?

✱ Provide well-grounded adult faith formation as part of the sacramental programs. Enable the adults to take time for reflection on the meaning of the sacrament for their lives, not just adult sessions that address what the children are learning, or what the children should wear, etc. Adult sessions that are planned for the adult's faith growth "says" to them: the sacraments you have already celebrated call you to a life of discipleship.

✱ At times, people look at the components of sacramental programs as "the list of things I need to do to get the sacrament." Nothing could be further from the truth. The components of sacramental programs are simply (but deeply) an introduction to (or deepening of) the living out of the Christian life—the life we are called to everyday for the rest of our lives.

Everything we say and do needs to help families understand that community living, prayer and worship, catechesis, and service are not just things we do because we're preparing for a sacrament. They are the way we live the Christian life.

If children (and their families) are asking to celebrate the sacraments of initiation, they are "saying" that they want to be Catholics with a living, conscious, and active faith. As they prepare for the celebration of a sacrament, our programs attempt to involve them in living what they are asking/promising to live for the rest of their lives.

✱ Perhaps we should be careful of how we talk about the components of our sacramental programs. Service is certainly a component, because it is a given of the Christian lifestyle. Is it always best to attach a specific number of hours (and perhaps penalize them if they don't reach those hours)? What does that really say? They are called to service for the rest of

their lives, but is there a "guideline" which everyone has to achieve every year? Will we be judged on how many hours we squeezed in each year?

If the purpose of asking children to participate in a very deliberate way in all the aspects of being Christian as they prepare for the sacraments is to allow them to experience and grow in the life they will be living everyday for the rest of their lives, perhaps we need to be sure that our "requirements" for sacraments are real but not restrictive, are challenging but not a burden, are empowering for discipleship rather than authoritarian.

✱ Don't stress the celebration of the sacraments as a goal or an end. Sacraments are introductions, an initiation into a way of life. They really don't have anything to do with finishing a book or completing the components of the program. The learning, the prayer, the service, the participation in community continues. What does it say when we give a schedule and have the celebration of the sacrament as the "last thing" on the schedule? When giving families the schedule, be sure to include events/happenings that occur after the celebration of the sacrament. For instance, if con-

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*The sacraments  
are about living  
our Christian commitment  
in every part of our lives;  
they're about Christian  
Catholic living.*

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firmation is celebrated in junior high, include all the events of on-going high school youth ministry. It might also mean ensuring that the celebration of first Communion is not the last event of the year; that it is scheduled at a time that allows for continued religious education sessions and family events following the celebration.

✱ Don't make the first celebration of the sacrament something that it's not. First Communion is just that, the first of many. To talk about first Communion as "the big day" (and some textbooks even do that!) puts all the stress on that one moment, rather than on our continual discipleship and living out of the eucharistic mystery in our lives. When children and families talk about "making my reconciliation," it sounds as though we only do it once.

✱ Don't overemphasize externals (such as dress, practices, pictures, etc.). Do we spend more time on these details than we do on reflection on living the Christian life? Do they receive lots of direction on these things from us—and then never hear from us again after the celebration is over—perhaps giving the impression that that moment is what's most important rather than directing their focus and attention to the challenging call we have to be Christ in our world everyday of our lives? |

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# Immigration as Pilgrimage

Brett C. Hoover, CSP



Unable to find sufficient work in his native town in central Mexico in the 1990s, Hector—a pseudonym—left his wife and children for the small Midwestern city of Havenville. By the time I met him in 2007, he regularly sent them enough money for school, clothing, and food. But long before

that, soon after he arrived, he had missed them and loneliness was getting to him. Theologian Daniel Groody describes loneliness as key to the psycho-spiritual alienation of immigrants. He writes, “Loneliness is a heavy burden and one of the most unrecognized aspects of the immigrant’s pain.”<sup>1</sup> Groody notes that many look to the church as a salve, though sometimes without success. And indeed Hector had developed what he called a “thirst” for attending Mass in those early days. And so he set off for downtown.

He walked toward a large, brick building in the center of town. Located in a tree-lined plaza, it had a clock tower, multiple stone steps, and large doors, just like the churches back home. But he saw no one around. As he turned to walk up the long path, he saw the church doors open. Out came two police officers, firearms at their side and badges on their uniforms. Hector tensed. Having come so far, he could not risk an encounter with the police and possible deportation. He turned around and walked back down the street, disoriented. What kind of a country had armed *policía* guarding the church? Later, of course, he discovered that the tall building in the middle of town was not the church at all but the county courthouse. But now he only felt fear and confusion. What in the world was the story with the church in the United States?

Hector had the wrong impression, but he asked the right question: What is the story with the church in the United States? Stories tell us who we are. American politicians speak of a “nation of immigrants,” and this evokes a beloved, shared story that tells of people from many nations drawn together as one—*e pluribus unum*. But is this the right story for Americans? The story does not sit well with many African-Americans, who did not voluntarily migrate to the United States, and who through the era of segregation, were barred from coming together with everyone else. Since the 1960s,

Catholics have offered up a similar “immigrant to mainstream” story about ourselves, but that story emphasizes the European immigrant experience and has little to offer to poor, Hispanic immigrants who do not feel very mainstream these days. So what kind of a narrative would represent the struggles of people like Hector? How could it help those born here live as part of a diverse church always in flux?

## THE PILGRIMAGE STORY

Imagine migration to the United States as a pilgrimage, a disorienting but also transformative spiritual journey. Migration to the United States is, of course, a physical journey, crossing geographical boundaries. And the journey does not end when migrants arrive. The arrival itself constitutes one more journey, a difficult journey of cultural and religious adjustment to a very different world.

Most of what Catholics today have had to say about contemporary immigration begins with narratives not overtly religious. On the one side of the issue, people tell a story about poor immigrants struggling for their rights—a true story amply demonstrated in countless immigration stories past and present. On the other side, people talk about the law and how it requires obedience to keep order. That story also contains truth, particularly about the fragility of order. But both of these stories present considerable problems when we lean on them alone. Regarding the law, our country has too often manifested a poor correspondence in practice between law and justice. Frequently the law establishes an order, but one that favors the few over the many. Think of segregation, the internment of the Japanese, and the long denial of citizenship and voting rights to all but white men. Regarding the story of a person’s struggle for rights, it fares a bit better in our history, but it tends toward an individualism that downplays the responsibilities of the larger society. It too can skimp on justice. Should Hector receive the “rights” of someone with legal papers, this would mostly mean he would be left alone. He might still work for less than whites with the same job or live in substandard housing. Thus, even the necessary story of “rights” does not offer enough to a church that prides itself on *communio*, the Spirit-made bonds that exist among the baptized for the sake of God’s Reign.

<sup>1</sup> Daniel Groody, *Border of Death, Valley of Life: An Immigrant Journey of Heart and Spirit* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002) 29.

I would argue for choosing *pilgrimage* as an additional and important story for American Catholics, a story that can speak more fully to Hector and those like him. Part of the reason it works is that it does not depend on a single, one-size-fits-all narrative. In Christian tradition, pilgrimage has always functioned in a flexible manner, made to speak to the needs of believers in different times and places. “Pilgrims of a certain period construct the images of the holy places in different ways than pilgrims of another age,” says Israeli historian Ora Limor.<sup>2</sup> For example, pilgrimage to Jerusalem, the central holy site of Christianity, had a number of different rationales by the Byzantine Era—intellectual curiosity, ascetic commitment, healing, participation in festivals.<sup>3</sup> Limor traces three different motivations that launched medieval pilgrims in the Latin West—passionate practice of the Christian faith, penance, or a desire to die in the holy places.<sup>4</sup> Throughout all this history, Christians saw themselves as a pilgrim people, strangers on the earth until the day of the resurrection.<sup>5</sup>

In 1967, Thomas Merton published a classic historical essay on pilgrimage, “From Pilgrimage to Crusade.” In it, he explains pilgrimage as the meeting of an exterior and interior journey. He does not consider it by nature a penitential journey, despite the widespread medieval use of pilgrimage as atonement for grave sin. For Merton the monk, pilgrimage remains an evocation of radical dependence on God, an *abandonment to the journey*. He lionizes the Irish monks who drifted off on the sea in small boats, content to let the tide take them wherever God wanted to lead them. Merton contrasts this radical abandonment with the arrogant certainty of the Crusaders and the conquistadors.<sup>6</sup>

## IMMIGRATION AS A PILGRIMAGE

Scholars have taken the story of pilgrimage and applied it to immigration. Sociologist Jacqueline Hagan reports on the Latin American custom of seeking a “final blessing” before set-

ting off on the journey to the United States.<sup>7</sup> Theologian San Hyun Lee speaks of Korean migration to the United States as a “pilgrimage in the wilderness of marginality.”<sup>8</sup> Theologian Daniel Groody focuses on the transformative interior journey evoked by the exterior journey of undocumented immigrants. For Groody, immigration has a paschal character to it. Migrants are the “crucified people” making the Stations of the Cross on a journey through Calvary to the empty tomb.<sup>9</sup>

None of these important descriptions of migration exhausts the rich metaphor of pilgrimage. In my work with migrants as both a researcher and a priest, I have also heard the makings of a spiritual journey, but one undertaken as a quest for work to aid their families. Everything else—celebration, hope, humor, pragmatism, and sorrow—comes as a consequence of setting off on that quest. When seen in that light, migration evokes Merton’s concept of abandonment to the journey. Like Merton’s archetypal Irish monks, immigrants surrender control over where they go on their quest for work and what happens to them on the way. To a certain extent, they surrender control

over their very identity, at least as it has been embedded in a set of relationships at home.

For migrants like Hector, this surrender of control and abandonment to the journey plays out in a kind of pragmatic resilience. Continually faced with outrageous situations, they find ways to endure them nonchalantly. Juan Carlos, a former migrant to Havenville, now back in Mexico, told me what he considered the *comical* story of his pursuit by a bear while crossing the border. His brother Gustavo, still in the United States, spoke matter-of-factly about his salary being siphoned off to pay child support for a man he had never met but whose papers he had acquired. Other migrants converted their nonchalance into humor. One man joked to me over dinner during the presidential election, “Padre, we have a candidate, but our vote only counts here in the dining room.”

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2 Ora Limor, “Holy Journey: Pilgrimage and Christian Sacred Landscape,” *Christians and Christianity in the Holy Land: From the Origins to the Latin Kingdoms*, vol. 5 of series Cultural Encounters in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages, ed. Yitzhak Hen (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2006) 353.  
3 Brouria Bitton-Ashkelony, *Encountering the Sacred: The Debate on Christian Pilgrimage in Late Antiquity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).  
4 Limor, “Holy Journey,” 321-353.  
5 Michael W. Twomey, “Homo Viator,” *Encyclopedia of Medieval Pilgrimage*, ed. Larissa Taylor, et al (Boston: Brill, 2010) 265-267.  
6 Thomas Merton, “From Pilgrimage to Crusade,” *Mystics and Zen Masters* (New York: Farrar, Straus, & Giroux, 1967) 94-112.

7 Jacqueline Hagan, “Faith for the Journey: Religion as a Resource for Migrants,” *Promised Land, Perilous Journey: Theological Perspectives on Migration*, ed. Daniel G. Groody and Gioacchino Campese (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2008) 7-13.  
8 San Hyun Lee, “Pilgrimage and Home in the Wilderness of Marginality,” *Korean Americans and Their Religions: Pilgrims and Missionaries from a Different Shore*, ed. Ho-Youn Kwon, Kwang Chung Kim, and R. Stephen Warner (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2001) 64.  
9 Daniel Groody, *Border of Death, Valley of Life*, 32-33; and Daniel Groody, “Jesus and the Undocumented Immigrant: A Spiritual Geography of a Crucified People,” *Theological Studies* 70 (2009): 298-316.

Abandonment to the journey also plays out in experiences of accompaniment on the journey. Faced with widespread anti-immigrant hostility, people appreciated those who unexpectedly helped them and treated them with respect. They treasured their *compadres* (godparents of their children) who served as proxy families. Churchgoing migrants appreciated having a faith community in their own language according to their own culture. Many spoke like Hector, surprised and amazed to now be helping others within the parish and town where they themselves had once felt so lost.

Powerful experiences of human accompaniment evoke a sense of divine accompaniment. The theologian Gemma Tulud Cruz, an immigrant herself, writes,

As [immigrants] move from one reality to another, so does their God, who is not established in a solid temple but shares in their provisional life. God walks alongside them and becomes a pilgrim on the roads of this uneven world, nurturing and blessing them by the power of renewed relationships and community with the household of life.<sup>10</sup>

Perhaps more surprisingly, migration also pushes Euro-American Catholics (“Anglos”) to a kind of abandonment to the journey. Long accustomed to cultural dominance in their cities and towns, white people also undergo a loss of control as their neighborhoods change. The pastoral theologian Stephen Dudek writes, “Long-time residents in established neighborhoods grieve the loss of what was formerly a familiar and stable environment.”<sup>11</sup> In my own study, I found both strug-

gle and grief over demographic transformation. Many found their changed world incomprehensible. They complained about practices inexplicable to them—double-parking, driving without insurance, and the use of Spanish on public signs.

Euro-American Catholics sometimes mightily resist abandoning themselves to the journey. Ultimately they had little choice; the economy depends on immigrants. Some go along willingly. A young mother celebrated the revival of the parish school due to the attendance of immigrants’ children, and she brought her son dutifully to the birthday parties of Mexican classmates, even when she was the only Anglo mother to do so. Others go along unwillingly. A longtime parish leader complained loudly about the signs in Spanish on main streets. But, she added, “I might as well get used to it and so had my friends.”

### ABANDONMENT TO THE JOURNEY IN SCRIPTURE

Does the specific pilgrim experience of abandonment to the journey have a biblical precedent? Many would point to Abraham, whom St. Paul saw as the archetypal person on a faith journey. Nevertheless, Abraham’s adventures may not seem that familiar to immigrants today. Abraham was rich and well-provisioned for his journey (Gn 13:2). The biblical accounts do not speak of his disorientation and loss of control, but his constancy and victories.

Migraton today instead resembles the strange story of Tobit. Tobit abandoned himself to a journey, and his journey involved involuntary migration to the major economic center of his time, Nineveh. In his new home, he obtained success but kept faithful to his culture and religion. His faithfulness cost him. He suffered defamation and renewed exile. Also like many migrants today, Tobit and his wife Anna focused attention on their child, Tobias. They grieved deeply when separated from him.

10 Gemma Tulud Cruz, “Between Identity and Security: Theological Implications of Migration in the Context of Globalization,” *Theological Studies* 69 (2008): 369.  
11 Stephen Dudek, “Building a Home for the Multicultural Parish: Lessons Learned,” *New Theology Review* 13, no. 1 (February 2000): 39-40.

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Their son Tobias also undertook a journey across borders. He went to Media on a quest for material resources to aid his family. On the road, he encountered Sarah, who had suffered much at the hands of demonic powers, a more figurative parallel to the discrimination today's migrants suffer. The two married and returned to Nineveh, had children, and eventually were forced to relocate once again. Neither they nor Tobit and Anna ever returned to Israel.

The story of Tobit's family is one of continual forced relocation in the wake of political and economic changes, and they faced the disorientation and struggle that goes with migration. They found themselves in outrageous situations (including Tobit being blinded by a defecating bird), and they, like today's migrants, responded with pragmatism and faith. Unlike Abraham, Tobit's family suffered unpredictable reversals of fortune. Yet their journey brought them both divine and human accompaniment on the journey, symbolized in Tobias' traveling companion, the angel Raphael disguised as Tobit's kinsman, Azariah.

### THE CHURCH EN ROUTE TO THE REIGN OF GOD

Buoyed up by the biblical story of Tobit and the spiritual writing of Merton, the story of pilgrimage as abandonment to the journey serves us well. Yet despite its advantages, the story of pilgrimage also has its theological weaknesses. Historically and biblically, pilgrimage moves toward sacred space, a holy destination. As John Inge notes, with pilgrimage "the place itself bears witness," usually past human encounters with God.<sup>12</sup> Comparing pilgrimage to immigration risks making the United States into a holy destination, a conclusion uncomfortably like the exceptionalism and manifest destiny that justified innumerable wars, unjust treatment of locals, and the outright stealing of other people's land. This moves us closer to Merton's crusaders and conquistadors than to his Irish monks. Pilgrimage may also suggest a story of spiritual transformation that may or may not occur along the journey of immigration. Nor is all immigrant-suffering redemptive. Gemma Cruz notes that migration in a globalized world unfortunately often leads to all sorts of racial and gender discrimination.<sup>13</sup> Finally, immigration seen as pilgrimage potentially imposes one story on what is actually a whole diverse array of relocation experiences. It easily morphs into a nationalistic Horatio Alger narrative where new life in the new world always trumps sorrows in the old world. Sometimes, but not always.

A remedy lies in complementing pilgrimage with a vision of church as holy community en route to the Reign of God. The Second Vatican Council's primary image of the church was the pilgrim People of God, an image that implies a holy destination that is eschatological—both here and not yet here. The Council writes, "[The church's] end is the kingdom of God, which has been begun by God Himself on earth, and which is to be further extended until it is brought to perfection by

Him at the end of time, when Christ, our life, shall appear, and 'creation itself will be delivered from its slavery to corruption into the freedom of the glory of the children of God'" (LG 9). In deliberate contrast to the 19<sup>th</sup>-century image of the church as a static *societas perfecta* (perfect society), Vatican II found the People of God on a historical pilgrimage to the Reign of God as guided by the Holy Spirit. Pilgrimage seen in this light is less a voluntary spiritual practice than a metaphor for the communal life of the faithful en route to God's final transformation of all things. It becomes the "rhythm of the saints," a phrase borrowed from a 1990 album by the musician, Paul Simon.

In fact, actual pilgrimages have nearly always had that eschatological dimension to them. The religious studies scholar David Carrasco writes,

One of the most powerful aspects of pilgrimages is the expression of symbols and images of the new sense of community between human beings and between human beings and their gods... The pilgrims move towards the sacred source of *communitas*, in space or in the imagination. This allows the pilgrim eventually to return home and face the routines and rigors of life with a new sense of purpose and hope.<sup>14</sup>

Historically, travelling to the earthly Jerusalem suggested the Christian journey to the heavenly Jerusalem. To walk where Christ walked was to imitate his journey toward the resurrection, our true home. Pilgrimage has always bound us to a vision of the future that judges the present, what theologian Mary Elsbernd calls "the normativity of the future."<sup>15</sup>

As a result, earthly pilgrimage, including that of migration, must include a critical approach to the present order of things. A vision of holy hospitality to the marginal, unity-in-diversity, and radical dependence on God should figure ever larger in the Catholic story of immigration. Such a vision rescues pilgrimage from any sentimentalizing or exaggerated spiritualization. The pilgrim's abandonment to the journey evokes faith on the longer journey to the Reign of God. The tradition of welcoming the pilgrim echoes the eschatological welcome for which all creation groans. ■

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14 David Carrasco, "Those Who Go on a Sacred Journey: The Shapes and Diversity of Pilgrimage," *Concilium* 4 (1996): 17.

15 Reimund Bieringer and Mary Elsbernd, "The 'Normativity of the Future Approach: Its Roots, Development, Current State and Challenges,'" *Normativity of the Future: Reading Biblical and Other Authoritative Texts in an Eschatological Perspective*, ed. Bieringer and Elsbernd (Leuven: Peeters, 2010) 3-25.

12 John Inge, *A Christian Theology of Place*, 97.

13 Gemma Cruz, "Between Identity and Security," 357-375.

# Storytelling as a Catechetical Tool in Eucharist Formation

Thomas Rinkoski



In the normal course of life, we travel from one task to another, sometimes with purpose, other times just pushing our way forward through life's laundry. Whether we whistle while we work or not, memories and music poke through ordinary time, hinting at deeper meaning and purpose.

Still, one job leads to another, and ordinary time fills up. Occasionally, rituals poke through the fabric of ordinary time allowing us to reconnect with our stories, and the link provides meaning and inspiration that renews and recreates. But rituals do not blossom and grow of their own accord. Valentine's Day can reduce the glory of love to dusty glimmers if it is only giving boxed chocolates and pre-made cards, but sometimes those same things can transform into portals pointing to the stories that give life meaning and purpose.

"I have this against you; that you have abandoned the love you had at first. Remember then, from what you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first."<sup>1</sup>

We proclaim that the eucharistic liturgy is substantially more than one, extensive run-on sentence punctuated only by a succession of ritual commas, drifting through an hour or so like a meandering creek, falling, at its terminus, like a hammer with "Go, the Mass is ended!" Even when delivered with certain smoothness, perhaps even a fashionable faithfulness to the grammar of history, the ritual can lack depth, breadth, and not speak. History lists civilizations that ignored the ossification of their rituals at their own peril. Ritual is like the storyteller's talking stick; at the beginning, it's held in trust by the Griot, but then passed around the campfire. I believe the eucharistic ritual can be a portal, an entry point, into the mysteries of the faith. I believe the catechist has a role in facilitating this opportunity.

This article focuses on one catechetical strategy to help parishioners access the mysteries of the Eucharist. The strategy is connected to the traditional definition of the Eucharist as a memorial meal. This is built on Jesus' command to "Do this in memory of me."<sup>2</sup> As a memorial meal, the participants in the sacred liturgy are invited to remember Christ's death and resurrection, the institution of the Eucharist, and "proclaim the paschal mystery of Jesus until he comes."<sup>3</sup> As catechists, we are called to foster those memories *and* facilitate memory making. I believe a primary tool for that work is storytelling. Storytelling offers the catechist a tool

that can deepen and enrich participants' understanding of the memory aspect of Eucharist, as well as offers eucharistic pilgrims a way to connect with the divine mysteries.

Primarily in the context of catechesis for first Communion, I propose this one catechetical strategy. Here, the assumption is that catechists would be working with elementary school

aged children and their parents. While the process will work for children or parents separately, it is significant in the context of eucharistic catechesis that both groups approach the table together. These concepts have been tried and tested in a parish first Communion preparation program with both children and adults.

## STORYTELLING AS A CATECHETICAL TOOL

Storytelling offers the catechist a readily accessible, non-technical avenue for theological reflection. Jesus used storytelling as standard equipment in his evangelistic approach, building his parables from images culled from his environment, rooting them in imagery from his own sacred tradition. As Pope John Paul II indicated, it is not "a matter of inventing a new program...but it must be translated into pastoral ini-

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1 Rev 2:4-8.

2 Lk 22:19, 1 Cor 11:24.

3 *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, #1344.



tiatives adapted to the circumstances of each community.”<sup>4</sup> Storytelling serves as a catalyst for theological reflection in its challenge of the imagination. It is in our imagination that we can begin to grasp the mysteries of Jesus’ teachings. This apprehension is rooted in a sacramental encounter in which the divine is accessible through symbols and stories, which the ritual framework provides. Storytelling constructs a future using the building blocks of the past, as listeners become co-creators with the Divine Storyteller. Further, storytelling connects listeners, facilitating the gathering of the Christian community in a common point of departure while offering them a direction and destination.

“Remembering God’s achievements, remembering your marvels in the past, I reflect on all you did, I ponder all your achievements.”<sup>5</sup>

The rituals of Eucharist offer catechists a platform for shared story work in its multiple invitations to explore. Storytelling invites us to explore mystery with a reverence that does not

demand complete understanding. This permits children and adults to investigate the complexity of biblical and religious concepts like “love your enemies” without having to water it down. Again, to quote Pope John Paul II, storytelling enables us “albeit with trepidation to gaze in some way into the depths of mystery.”<sup>6</sup>

“What is revealed is not that there is a mystery, but the fact that we are bonded to that mystery.”<sup>7</sup> A good story reminds us of the failure of logic and human reason without feelings of abandonment or loss. Storytelling leads us to encounter the sacred by taking seriously our human experience as an entry into a broader reality; it moves us into the sacred because it moves the sacred within us. It is not necessarily an easy or comfortable movement in all circumstances—more akin to Jacob’s wrestling with the angel than story hour at the local library. Jesus, in his use of parables to talk about the kingdom, did not seem averse to this risk. Jesus seemed to know that while stories stimulate response, they do not demand a specific response, rather a felt response. The lack of total control honors human free will. As Jesus creates the

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4 Pope John Paul II, “At the Beginning of the New Millennium,” 6 January 2011.

5 Ps 77:11-12.

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6 Pope John Paul II, “New Millennium”.

7 John Shea, *Stories of Faith*, (Thomas More Assoc., June 1980).



parables of the kingdom, the tales are light and deceptively simple. The kingdom of God is like a mustard seed, like yeast, like a lost pearl. But all too quickly the story spins us around, and we become disoriented. The art of a great storyteller lies in how well s/he confirms the basic trust of the listener, while also challenging understanding. The disorientation opens doors to questions of the ultimate. The Jewish tales of the Ball Shem Tov operate in the same way; to exit the parable, one must leave behind the questions that led you there and focus on new insights and feelings as you walk into the future.

Because we dwell in a culture in which storytelling is not naturally at home, an investment is required. While pictures transmitted over Facebook may have the power to melt hearts of grandparents and relatives continents away, stories not only melt the heart and mind, but help in refashioning it in a new and bold direction. Unlike television or other visual media, storytelling is suggestive. Listeners have to fill in the colors, paint a picture suggested by the teller's voice and face. As Sr. José Hobday submits, storytelling invites us

to think with our senses.<sup>8</sup> Story listening demands the full, conscious, and active participation Vatican II called for in the Eucharist.<sup>9</sup>

Stories are best when they incite action. Well-told stories move listeners to become tellers. It is a common refrain in any good storytelling circle for the listeners to call to mind something similar that happened to themselves. Among storytellers we speak of this as the Canterbury effect, as a nod of affirmation to the master tale. In Eucharist, we can “translate” this effect as participation. Even more important, this participatory shift can become a declaration of faith. In remembering our virtue and not forgetting our sins, we can be fully empowered to be present and capable of shaping the future. Second, telling stories allows us to imagine a world of possibilities; with stories we are enabled to more freely play with our paradigms, opening ourselves to wider possibilities of what it means to be active participants in the mystery and message of Jesus.

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8 Sr. Maria José Hobday, “Strung Memories,” *Parabola Magazine* (Nov 1979) vol 4.

9 *Constitution of the Sacred Liturgy*, #14.

It is to be noted that the purpose of incorporating storytelling in the context of eucharistic catechesis is not necessarily about building religious vocabulary; that is a different catechetical goal. While good stories evoke response, stories should not be bastardized as “hooks” to capture the attention of our students so we can move on to other parts of our lesson plan. To achieve a healthy, successful eucharistic catechesis, a multitude of approaches are required. My point is that there is danger in not using storytelling as a part of eucharistic catechesis. There is a danger in thinking that we can teach people into mystery. Framing the work of story properly opens up the possibility for us as teachers to use a wider variety of stories. Knowing that the human movement toward mystery is slow plows plenty of ground for a wide variety of other catechetical strategies.

#### AN EXAMPLE OF A PARTICULAR STORY IN USE

There are an abundance of children’s stories that can serve in developing a culture of memory that can feed the eucharistic soul. I was blessed to be handed by a professional children’s librarian, *Wilfrid Gordon McDonald Partridge*.<sup>10</sup> This story provides us with a well-told tale that speaks to the theme of memory. Inside the cover is a wonderfully simple story of a young boy who lives “next door to an old people’s home.” Wilfrid enters an adventure when he finds out one of his friends “has lost her memory.” In trying to discover what memories are, he gathers a box of “sacramental” symbols with the intent of awakening her remembering. This story provides a framework for entering into the hefty theological concept of the meal as memorial. It even provides us with an entry point to discuss signs and symbols as those things which “provoke the presence of God,” to borrow an old image. In our classroom, this year, we made this into a fun and engaging game!

Fox’s story has a short, simple plot that is easy for the hearer to enter. She is an accomplished author on several levels. The storyline moves along at an easy pace and is populated by familiar characters and real things and places. These are the base criterion for a good story to use in the catechetical context. This particular story was written for a primary audience of four- to eight-year-old children, but I have used the same tale with middle school students and the adult parents in the session.

Just as the Catechism notes that the Eucharist “is not merely the recollection of past events but the proclamation of the

mighty works,”<sup>11</sup> Wilfrid’s actions result not as he anticipated, but in something new and powerful.

It is uncomplicated to pair this story with the Emmaus passage in Luke.<sup>12</sup> In both stories, the characters are on a journey and working on remembering. In both, it is sacramental signs and symbols that open up new possibilities. The limitations of this essay don’t permit me to detail the myriad of ways these two tales can be opened up in the classroom or with parents to give life to the eucharistic concept of memory. It is worth stating that, in my experience, this sort of pairing seems to add depth and breadth to the Scripture story.

Another story, *Stone Soup*, comes from the folk tale tradition.<sup>13</sup> Fables and even fairy tales have proven excellent source material for stories that grab children’s attention. Nor am I averse to using poetry at times! *Stone*

*Soup* provides an excellent frame to talk about the ins and outs of building community, gathering the folks, inspiring people to action and communion. The story stands as proof that living together does not necessarily make a community. It provides the effective catechist with an easy venue to talk about participation (or the blocks to it) in the faith community.

#### STORYTELLING WITH PARENTS

I have learned not to underestimate the power of good storytelling. All too often, we relegate storytelling just to children. It is a sad commentary and perhaps a misunderstanding of what evangelization can be. I believe when Christian adults gather to remember, they engage in a foundational storytelling process creating bonds that nurture hope and faith. When we gather parents, our first impulse is to “teach” them what the textbook publisher insists they need to know. I think we need to first invite them to reach back into their memories of their own first Communion experiences and let those stories pour out. Fostering remembering connects us with that eucharistic movement in a much more primary way. For some catechists, such storytelling may only seem like making space for introductory comments, a sort of “warm-up” phase before getting to the “real” stuff. Personally, I believe this connection *is* the real stuff. First Communion holds an iconic place in our Catholic psyche for a reason; it points to our bottom line as a sacramental people. In retelling these stories, you can hear people dialoguing with their religious traditions. In this storytelling,

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*My point is that there is danger in not using storytelling as a part of eucharistic catechesis. There is a danger in thinking that we can teach people into mystery.*

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10 Mem Fox, *Wilfrid Gordon McDonald Partridge* (LaJolla: Kane/Miller, 1985).

11 *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, #1363.

12 Lk 24:13-35.

13 Heather Forest, retold, *Stone Soup* (Little Rock: August House, 1998).

the parents create a “rope ladder” between the liturgical experience and their ordinary time.

I believe Søren Kierkegaard stated that life can only be understood backwards, but must be lived forwards; parents’ storytelling witnesses to that reality. They want their children to step forward, and it is their stories that will frame the direction. In facilitating parental storytelling, good questions are important, but an open attitude and a willingness to release total control is absolutely essential. This can be a harrowing experience for the catechist with limited time and resources. We feel constrained with little time and far too many “points” that need to be communicated; but, how better to demonstrate openness to the story of Christ than to live it out in front of them? If we really honestly believe that the parents are the primary educators, this may be the best way we can motivate them to reach for a deeper reality.

The power of storytelling among adults can be witnessed in the small ecclesial community movements that have dotted the church’s landscape for years. When small groups of people come together to tell life stories, the power of God is not in the diction or style of the teller, but in the depth of the faith sharing, the risk taken, and the hope that keeps bringing them together. The goal of storytelling among adults begins with stories well told and builds on personal stories they share with each other and their children. This is not “homework” but rather our encouragement of religious conversations within family systems.

### THE TRAITS OF A GOOD STORYTELLER

Storytelling places a demand on the teller. “To be a good storyteller, one must be ‘gloriously alive!’”<sup>14</sup> Stories are not simply a teaching device to be picked and chosen to augment a listless lesson plan. A bond will form only if the teller is willing to risk this piece of her/himself to another. It is the gift a parent gives. It is a living testament to Christ’s call to “do this in memory of me.” Storytelling should never be a bland memorization, but a loving offering of the self. The teller must read and understand the tale, empathize with all the feelings, and practice, practice, practice. As St. Paul is quick to insist, catechists who employ telling must prepare well but trust in the Spirit instead of human wisdom.<sup>15</sup> Storytelling is not about hamming it up! We want the listeners to remember the story, not the teller.

14 Ruth Sawyer, *The Way of the Storyteller* (New York: Penguin Books) 1976. To me, this sounds eerily like St. Irenaeus (*Against Heresies*), “The glory of God is man fully alive!”

15 Especially as St. Paul writes in a variety of passages in 1 Cor.

### CAUTIONS

In this proposal, I am not singling out storytelling as necessarily the best theological tool or the sole method to be used in catechesis for Eucharist. I do wish to emphasize its potential significance as a key strategy in eucharistic catechesis. That storytelling cannot assure specific testable outcomes may be viewed as a liability or as an asset depending on one’s perceptions of the outcomes. I do believe storytelling can serve healthy eucharistic catechesis in that it directly serves the metaphor of “memory” and facilitates access to the divine in a way that is, paradoxically, much more direct than other catechetical formulas. As I have tried to point out, storytelling has an ability to lead people to the door of community and into the divine mystery. But we need to be there at the gate as hospitality ministers, ready and welcoming when they arrive.

There is the problem of skill; not every teacher is a storyteller, and not every catechist is willing to wager the risk of storytelling. NCCL conferences might offer workshops on improving these skills. We might learn from our brothers and sisters in the Network of Biblical Storytellers,<sup>16</sup> the National Storytelling Network,<sup>17</sup> or start by taking a pilgrimage to a local storytelling camp in our own state. Throughout the U.S., easily within the reach of every faith community, there are local storytelling guilds that could provide support and nurture.

And if we dare to use stories, we must use great ones! We must choose stories that fit our people. Stories have a fluidity that is woven with local color and are subject to history. It is important we honor that, but it demands research—finding good stories that fit local settings. These will not be the same everywhere. Most places are blessed with people who have eyes to see and ears to hear. Again, this is a place we can turn to professional tellers.

### CONCLUSION

I would rather have told you a story! These thoughts are offered as an affirmation of the ongoing work of so many dedicated catechists who work in the “fields.” Their stories have enriched my life. In order to speak to the richness of the Eucharist, I believe we need to root ourselves in the dynamic of storytelling with energy and enthusiasm. ■

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16 Network of Biblical Storytellers (NBS), [www.nbsint.org](http://www.nbsint.org).

17 National Storytelling Network, [www.storynet.org](http://www.storynet.org).

# “Ready, Set, Go Evangelize” Again!

John and Therese Boucher

On June 28, 2010, Pope Benedict XVI made a surprising announcement:

I have decided to create a new organism, in the form of a pontifical council, with the principal task of promoting a renewed evangelization in the countries where the first proclamation of faith has already resounded... but which are living through a progressive secularization of society and a kind of “eclipse of the sense of God” (Vatican City, Catholic News Service).

Then in the fall of that year, he declared that the focus of the 2012 World Synod of Bishops would be The New Evangelization for the Transmission of the Christian Faith. (In 2011, the USCCB announced that this would also be the theme for Catechetical Sunday 2012.)

The call to a “new evangelization,” as emphasized in *A Doctrinal Note on Some Aspects of Evangelization* (2007), says, “New evangelization designates pastoral outreach to those who no longer practice the Christian faith” (Section 12).

This call for “new evangelization” is not in itself new. As early as 1983, Pope John Paul II appealed to the whole church by saying, “The moment has come to commit all of the Church’s energies to a new evangelization (emphasis ours) and to the *mission ad gentes*. No believer in Christ, no institution of the Church can avoid this supreme duty: to proclaim Christ to all peoples” (*Mission of the Redeemer*, 3).

What is “new” is the focus on both re-evangelizing unchurched and inactive Catholics (“new evangelization”), as well as increased missionary work with those who have neither heard of Jesus Christ, nor been invited into a life-giving relationship with him in the Catholic Church (*mission ad gentes*—“to the nations”).

These are some features of this “new evangelization”:

**Discerning**—The spirit of God is working in the world and in the heart of each unchurched and inactive Christian. Through baptism, he or she is already our brother or sister in Christ.

With the patient love of Jesus, we look for signs of how the Spirit is moving that person’s life, affirming those signs as part of God’s call to them. Then we share some part of the gospel message, catechesis, sacraments, tradition, or church teaching as invitations to come follow Jesus more deeply.

**Missionary witness**—Because of wide disaffection with Christianity and the church in our culture, we must live as missionaries or messengers—sent by Christ and the church to live our faith out loud in our family, neighborhood, parish, workplace, and community. Our baptismal call is to encounter Jesus Christ in our daily lives and to share the

unconditional love of God by serving others. This silent witness is critical in evangelizing.

**Proclaim Christ**—Experience has shown us that such loving presence and service alone does not necessarily bring people back to Christ and the church. We must find the words to share our personal faith stories with others—how Jesus has touched our lives and changed us, how the love of the Christian community has made us whole—and invite our family, friends, and acquaintances to

join us in the Catholic Church.

**Urgency**—With Sunday Mass participation at only 23 percent of Catholics in the United States, an appropriate “haste” to evangelize in new ways seems warranted. Some researchers suggest that Sunday Mass attendance will continue to drop one percent per year at least through 2020.

**Boldness**—It will take more than “business as usual” for us to evangelize those who no longer follow Jesus. We need a “holy audacity,” a “holy madness.” We need to surrender more completely to the person of the Holy Spirit, the principal agent of evangelization, asking that we be filled and empowered for this mission with all the spiritual gifts. “And as they prayed, the place where they were gathered shook, and they were all filled with the holy Spirit and continued to speak the word of God with boldness” (Acts 4:31).

**Solidarity**—When we face opposition to and misunderstanding about our mission of evangelization in everyday life, we are not alone. Jesus reminds us, “And behold, I am with you

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*Because of wide disaffection  
with Christianity and the church  
in our culture, we must live  
as missionaries or messengers—  
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workplace, and community.*

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always..." (Mt 28:20). We are united with all the saints, to whom the Lord says, "Do not be afraid. Go on speaking, and do not be silent, for I am with you. No one will attack and harm you, for I have many people in this city" (Acts 18:9-10).

**Evangelize culture**—Culture has been spoken of as the national background, community, neighborhood, work, family, with all the joy, hope, grief, and anguish of those around us.

The new evangelization calls for a clearly conceived, serious, and well organized effort to evangelize culture. The Son of God, by taking upon Himself our human nature, became incarnate within a particular people, even though His redemptive death brought redemption to all people, of every culture, race and condition. The gift of His Spirit and His love are meant for each and every people and culture, in order to bring them all into unity after the perfect unity existing in the Triune God (Pope John Paul II, *Ecclesia in America*, 70).

So, we are called to bridge this gulf with a missionary evangelization as if we are being sent to bring the gospel of Jesus across the galaxy to planets light-years away. As Pope John Paul II noted, "The Spirit is present in the Church and he is

the guide in mission to the nations. It is comforting to know that not we, but he is the principal agent of mission. This fills us with peace, joy, hope, and courage. It is not the results that must concern the missionary, because they are in God's hands: he or she must work with all his resources and let the Lord work" (*Message for World Mission Sunday 1998*, 4). ■

(Some material for this article was adapted from Archived Online Discussion: Jesus: A Biography from a Believer by Paul Johnson. Copyright © 2010, Fr. Thomas Rocia, CSB, Chief Executive Officer. Salt and Light Television, Canada, saltandlighttv.org. For complete article, visit [kofc.org/chat/findChatInfo.action?broadcastChatId=1065](http://kofc.org/chat/findChatInfo.action?broadcastChatId=1065). Used with permission.)

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# unChristian: What A New Generation Thinks About Christianity...And Why It Matters

by David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons

## The Next Christians: How a New Generation Is Restoring the Faith

by Gabe Lyons

Reviewed by Daniel Thomas



These two recent books by two young evangelicals deal with evangelization of the young people of our contemporary culture. They belong together because without the background of the first book, the second is not as easily understood.

*unChristian* explores 16- to 29-year-olds outside of Christianity and their image of Christianity. The title of the book reflects that this generation “thinks Christians no longer represent what Jesus had in mind, that Christianity within our society is not what it was meant to be.”

The following shows the phrases used by this population to describe Christians and the percentage using that descriptor: anti-homosexual (91%), judgmental (87%), hypocritical (85%), sheltered, old-fashioned, out of touch with reality (78%), too political (75%), proselytizers, insensitive to others, not genuine (70%).

So, what should we do about these perceptions? Here is how Gabe Lyons and Dave Kinnamann respond:

Gabe and I frequently encounter the idea that Christians should not care what outsiders think about us. After all, Jesus warned that the “world” would hate us. Scripture even promises persecution for those who follow Christ.... However, before you dismiss the unChristian perception as “just Christians doing their duty,” realize that the challenge runs much deeper. The real problem comes when we recognize God’s holiness but fail to articulate the other side of his character: grace. Jesus represents truth plus grace (see Jn 1:14). Embracing truth without holding grace in tension leads to harsh legalism, just as grace without truth devolves to compromise. Still, the important insight based on our research is that Mosacs and Busters rarely see Christians who embody service, compassion, humility, forgiveness, patience, kindness, peace, joy, goodness, and love (24).

Knowing what others think of us can help us plan our approach to them; knowing also that by the way we talk and

act, we can change those perceptions. The following are the book’s suggestions on reformulating each perception:

- ★ From “Christians say one thing but live something entirely different” to “Christians are transparent about their flaws and act first, talk second.”
- ★ From “Christians are insincere and concerned only with converting others” to “Christians cultivate relationships and environments where others can be deeply transformed by God.”
- ★ From “Christians show contempt for gays and lesbians” to “Christians show compassion and love to all people, regardless of their lifestyle.”
- ★ From “Christians are boring, unintelligent, old-fashioned, and out of touch with reality” to “Christians are engaged, informed, and offer sophisticated responses to the issues people face.”
- ★ From “Christians are primarily motivated by a political agenda and promote right-wing politics” to “Christians are characterized by respecting people, thinking biblically, and finding solutions to complex issues.”
- ★ From “Christians are prideful and quick to find faults in others” to “Christians show grace by finding the good in others and seeing their potential to be Christ’s followers.”

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

The second book, *The Next Christians*, takes the research just described as a given and asks how the young people he describes in the title are living out a response to the negative picture our culture has of Christianity. Lyons tells true stories of young adults attempting by their choices to live a Christianity that pursues the principles of “new Christianity” for the future enunciated in the book. These are moving and challenging ways of living the Christian life now.

For example, Mike Foster was concerned about the impact of pornography and, in addition to developing software to help persons addicted to pornography, actually went (with his wife’s support) to an adult entertainment expo to listen, talk, and hand out free Bibles with “Jesus Loves Porn Stars” printed on the cover. “Even the adult filmmakers have worked with him

to expose and fight the injustices against women in the sex industry” (84). Instead of judgment, action!

There are six characteristics of these next Christians; they are:

- \* Provoked, not offended
- \* Creators, not critics
- \* Called, not employed
- \* Grounded, not distracted
- \* In community, not alone
- \* Countercultural, not “relevant”

In exploring what each of these means, Lyons uses real life stories of successes to flesh out their meanings. Some quotes:

“When the community is provoked, they assume a *proactive* posture; when a community is offended, they assume a *reactive* posture” (75).

“[T]he next Christians are provoked to *do* something when they arrive on the cultural scene—namely to create culture that can inspire change” (93). Lyons describes this culture that celebrates beauty, affirms goodness, tells the truth, and serves.

“They live in their own countries, but only as aliens. They have a share in everything as citizens, and endure everything as foreigners” (186).

In the “Grounded, Not Distracted” chapter he describes “practices that discipline:”

- \* Immersed in Scripture (instead of entertainment)
- \* Observing the sabbath (instead of being productive)
- \* Fasting for simplicity (instead of consuming)
- \* Choosing embodiment (instead of being divided)
- \* Posture by prayer (instead of power)

Lyons suggests we long for ways to reach out to and challenge young adults to be involved in something that is exciting and visionary. In addition to the books themselves, there are websites for each book ([unchristian.com](http://unchristian.com) and [nextchristians.com](http://nextchristians.com)), as well as a site with further explorations of where these books lead ([qideas.org/church](http://qideas.org/church)) that is most intriguing. You certainly won’t agree with all that is in these books or websites, but you will be stimulated and challenged to look at evangelization in new ways. |

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# Do This! Not That!

Leisa Anslinger



*“Belonging leads to believing.”* I shared that statement (from the Gallup research on parishioner engagement) with many at NCCL during the 2009 conference in Dearborn. Many of us continue to be challenged by this simple, straightforward statement.

On the surface, most of us are likely to agree, yet once we move from theory to practice with adults, including parents, we begin to wonder:

- ★ Isn't this just a little too “warm and fuzzy” for anything of substance?
- ★ What about all those parents we have seen come and go (often, many more going than coming) over the years? Surely they bear the responsibility for their actions!
- ★ What about those who are not Catholic, who are married outside the church, or who only come when their children reach a typical year for reception of a sacrament? How do we begin to help them feel they belong while staying true to the teaching of the church?

Yet with every challenge, we can list dozens of people who have come, or have come back, specifically because they felt they could belong. People like:

- ★ Those who come each year as inquirers who come with a new or more focused relationship with Christ after years of being in our pews as the spouse of a parishioner, often when their child is preparing for first Communion or confirmation;
- ★ Those who return to active practice of their Catholic faith, often with fervor and enthusiasm, after a heartfelt process of reflection with a friend or family member;
- ★ Those who find healing and peace in reconciliation, anointing of the sick, or the funeral of a loved one, and whose experience inspire us to recognize the gift and blessing of reaching out in special moments as these;
- ★ Those who arrive one Sunday after moving into our neighborhood and return, noting that they felt welcomed and people were patient with their children, even though they did not know anyone at Mass.

## MEET THE SPIRITUAL NEED

These experiences illustrate the dynamic process of evangelization and help us to think about this process from the perspective of the one we hope will come to belong with us. This is a key insight from the studies on religious affiliation (or non-affiliation) and engagement.

While we know what parents and families really need, we must begin or continue to fashion parish practice, keeping the lived experience of those we wish to evangelize in our minds

and hearts every step of the way. The engagement research tells us that if we wish to evangelize people, the first things they need to know are that their spiritual needs will be met (we will look at this in more detail in a future issue), and they need to know what is expected of them—what does the community hold as important for all members?

I imagine we have all seen the books titled, *Eat This, Not That!* Let us think about evangelization through the lens of engagement with a simple strategy of “Do This! Not That!” For fun, I have made the following examples a bit extreme, just to help us think about this with a bit of lighthearted humor.

Do This!	Not That!
Welcome new families to religious education whenever they appear on our doorstep.	Have a distinct registration period with a hard deadline, stating “if people want to come, they’ll get themselves here on time.”
Stay in the vestibule of church occasionally, watching for those who seem unfamiliar or slightly uneasy.	Don’t bother making announcements about sacramental preparation, as those who are ready will surely know to call the office.
Tell parents in a caring manner why programs and policies are in place as they are. Explain the way decisions have been made and why.	Produce a detailed report that lists the rules and responsibilities of parents, knowing that people won’t bother reading it. At least no one can say you didn’t tell them!
Give parents an opportunity to provide ideas for future faith formation opportunities at least once a year.	Create a few sessions for the coming year, knowing few will attend anyway. You might just pull out the list from two years ago—people won’t remember!

These are no doubt extreme examples, but they do illustrate a point. The distinction between parish practice that is truly engaging and evangelizing may be the difference between “Do This, and Not That!”

Some of our parish practices may not be as extreme as the ones above, yet every parish has room to grow. Those who come seeking Christ do not need some warm and fuzzy program that lacks spiritual depth or a true sense of the blessing and privilege of being a Christian; rather, we must build a community that is genuinely growing as disciples and who value every person as a child of God. In doing so, we will be sure to find that belonging does lead to believing! ■

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

# Do This in Memory of Me— The Prayer of a Diocesan Director

Ed Gordon



I have been a diocesan director of religious education for more than 30 years, and the Eucharist has sustained me through them all. Although daily Mass has never been my practice, I live for the weekly celebration of the Eucharist. In many ways, this is the bedrock of most lay spirituality, and it is the foundation of my personal prayer. The mystery of the Eucharist provides an infinite number of areas for my reflection as a diocesan catechetical leader. I would like to highlight a few themes that enrich my prayer.

## THE GIFT OF BORING MEETINGS

It is all gift. The Eucharist is Jesus' great gift to us and it calls each of us to recognize all of life as a gift. It isn't difficult to recognize the gift that our catechetical leaders are to us and to the church, or how privileged we are to do what we do. It is more difficult to recognize as gift the irate parent, or the person who dislikes the textbooks, or the one who doesn't understand why we have separate sacramental programs. Chancery politics, prima donas, procedures, long unproductive meetings, and budgets are all gifts; they are all gifts in the sense that they provide opportunities for growth in many ways we may not have chosen.

It is all about sharing. Jesus chose to leave a gift that is communal, not individual. Of course, it is personal, but it is a gift for the community. The catechetical ministry by its very nature demands collaboration. It is a ministry that depends on other ministries and partners to reach its goals. The Eucharist teaches me over and over again that it isn't about me, but about "we." A collaborative spirit is a eucharistic spirit. It gives us the wisdom and the strength to give up our individual worlds for the greater good.

## THE INSPIRATION FOR CATECHESIS

Scripture is central. There are two tables at the Eucharist: the table of the word, and the table of the bread and wine. They interpenetrate and interpret each other. As diocesan catechetical leaders, we need to be rooted in the word of

God. In the National Directory for Catechesis we read, "Catechesis should take Sacred Scripture as its inspiration, its fundamental curriculum, and its end because it strengthens faith, nourishes the soul, and nurtures the spiritual life" (24B).

It takes a community. Every once in a while, I have an opportunity to participate in a eucharistic celebration where the music is great, the lectors really proclaim, the congregation participates, the celebrant leads the community and gives a wonderful homily, and all of the ministers know what they are doing; it is a powerful experience. However, more often than not, we barely get through the ritual. There are glimpses of liturgical perfection, but they are brief and fleeting. We are a gathering of the ungifted. The great American writer Annie Dillard describes turning a corner and observing a mockingbird falling from a branch. Just before it hits the ground, it spreads its wings and gently touches down. She writes, "The fact of his free fall was like the old philosophical conundrum about the tree that falls in the forest. The answer must be, I think, *that beauty and grace are performed whether or not we will or sense them. The least we can do is try to be there*" (*Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, 10; emphasis added).

I like being there with my brothers and sisters who bring

their lives as best they can to the assembly, to share what they can and find it taken up and returned to them in the gift of Jesus himself. I don't always see it, but I know it happens. Doesn't every catechist bring his or her limited gifts to a catechetical event and find what one gives returned blessed and multiplied 100 times? It is a wonderful ministry. ■

*Ed Gordon is the Secretary for Catholic Education and the Director for Religious Education in the Diocese of Wilmington, Delaware. He has been a member of NCCL for more than 30 years.*

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*It is all about sharing.  
Jesus chose to leave a gift  
that is communal, not individual.  
Of course, it is personal,  
but it is a gift for the community.  
The catechetical ministry  
by its very nature  
demands collaboration.*

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# Creating a Welcoming Website

Russell Peterson

Last fall, Fr. Frank DeSiano of Paulist Evangelization Ministries presented a training on evangelization to parish pastoral councils in my diocese. He did a fantastic job. I look forward to his presentation at the NCCL conference in San Diego.

## “VISIT” MY PARISH

One of the exercises that he asked participants to do was mentally visit their parish, pretending that it was their first time. It was an enlightening activity that caused pastoral council members to recognize weaknesses in the physical aspects of the church campus and with the welcoming ministries. I had one problem with the exercise, however. Fr. Frank began the visit with the entrance to the parking lot.

I argued that the first place a potential parishioner visits is the parish website. Father said that was correct—for all people under the age of 45.

## UNDER THE AGE OF 45

I do not know how Fr. Frank arrived at the age of 45. I found it interesting that it was so close to my age. Hearing this led me to ponder my own experience on the digital continent. I never typed a research paper on a typewriter; my first year teaching high school, I had students in a computer lab researching on the Internet; during my first full-time parish ministry position, my cell phone number and e-mail address were on the front of the weekly bulletin. I think that my experience is fairly common for people my age, so I suppose the age of 45 is a good marker for those who entered adulthood with computers and cell phones.

## THE FIRST PLACE WE VISIT

If I am together with friends and we want to know the score of a game, someone pulls out their phone and looks it up. If my nine-year-old child hears about a new Japanese trading card, he goes to the computer and researches it (possibly making it our desktop). When my wife and I went to see *The Way* (fantastic film!), we checked out nearby theaters online.

When I moved, I visited the parish website to learn about children’s faith formation in the new parish. I discovered that the ministry has many forms to complete, and many rules to follow, and many collections for good causes. I learned how much it cost, and what to do if my child was going to be

absent. I tried to open the handbook, but the website did not have anything on this page when I selected it. The same was true for the newsletter. I saw a picture of the church building, but no people. There were no pictures of the catechetical leaders, or catechists, or children. The word “welcome” was on the homepage, but it was not welcoming.

## WEBSITES AS DOORS OF ENTRY

Websites are the primary doors of entry into your parish and your faith formation programs for those under the age of 45. It is their first impression of the parish and your ministry. This first impression needs to be positive and

relational. A sense of welcoming and compassion is more important than a list of rules and forms. It needs to connect with the good news of life in and through Jesus. It needs to show how the parish faith formation programs are going to help kids become joyful, successful adults. It needs to show adults how their participation can help them become saner, healthier, spirit-filled adults. We need to illustrate

that holiness, wholeness, happiness, and healthiness can be found through our ministry programs.

## COMPARING EXPERIENCES

Please Google “dance” and the city where you live. Click on the first website. Try to read the homepage through the eyes of a parent with a four-year-old daughter. Does the homepage offer answers for the following questions? Will my daughter be special to them? Will my daughter become a better person through this dance studio? Will I feel connected to the other parents, or will I feel isolated?

Now go to the homepage of your parish’s youth faith formation. How does it answer the following questions? Will my daughter be special to them? Will she become a better person through this church program? Will I feel connected to the other parents, or will I feel isolated?

In my experience, the dance studios are answering the questions better than we are. ■

*Russell Peterson is the associate director of catechesis for the Diocese of Belleville, Illinois, and the vice president of NCCL. Contact him at [RPeterson@diobelle.org](mailto:RPeterson@diobelle.org).*

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*A sense of welcoming and compassion is more important than a list of rules and forms. It needs to connect with the good news of life in and through Jesus.*

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

Compiled by Dan Pierson

**Why Stay Catholic?**

I read *Why Stay Catholic? Unexpected Answers to a Life-Changing Question* by Michael Leach (Loyola Press) while I was on vacation this past summer in the Sleeping Bear Dunes National Lakeshore in Leelanau, Michigan.

My appreciation and love of the Catholic Church was refreshed and renewed through both nature and *Why Stay Catholic?* As I moved through the book, I experienced a deep gratitude for my life as a Catholic and for the ideas, people, and places that have nurtured me in my faith and ministry. *Why Stay Catholic?* certainly gave me a greater sense of joy, encouragement, and excitement for being Catholic in 2012.

*Publisher's Weekly's* (February 23, 2011) review notes that

This book focuses on, in short and digestible chapters, ideas, people, and places that exemplify Catholicism's best. He (Leach) ranges from theological-institutional (Catholics have powerful sacramental imaginations that allow them to glimpse God unexpectedly) to just plain fun (Catholics like to party; Jesus did too). His "places" highlight the infrastructure of institutions that Catholics have built within society: charities, hospitals, schools, relief agencies—all an integral part of America's social backbone. This is a generous, loving, charming book—Catholicism at its best.

Begin the New Year by reading *Why Stay Catholic?* I am confident that you too will be inspired and renewed as you reflect on the "good stuff in Catholicism and the many reasons to celebrate the Catholic faith here and now."

Consider becoming a "reading parish" by sponsoring book discussions or creating a parish-wide reading program similar to those in communities, colleges, and libraries throughout the United States.

To learn more about Michael Leach, visit Loyola Press' website or read a featured

profile online in *St. Anthony Messenger Press*, May 2011.

**Michael Leach Recommends**

Leach, 70, is editor-at-large and publisher emeritus of Orbis Books. He has authored numerous books, and in a lifetime publishing career has published more than 2,000 titles. I asked Leach for his top three recommendations for catechetical leaders:

*Reclaiming Catholicism: Treasures Old and New* edited by Thomas H. Groome and Michael J. Daley. (Orbis Books).

*And Now I See...: A Theology of Transformation* by Robert Barron. (Crossroad Publishing).

*The Great Mysteries: Experiencing Catholic Faith from the Inside Out* by Andrew M. Greeley. (Sheed and Ward).

**Twelve Books for 2012**

In my work with eCatechist.com, faithAlivebooks.com, and *Catechetical Leader*, I receive information from publishers, blogs, and Catholic bibliophiles of both new and recently published titles.

Here are my recommendations for 2012. Please join me in reading:

*Grace Notes* by Brian Doyle. (ACTA Publications).

*Family Ethics: Practices for Christians* by Julie Hanlon Rubio. (Georgetown University Press).

*The Spirit of Vatican II: A History of Catholic Reform in America* by Colleen McDannell. (Basic Books).

*Thinking of You: The Weekly Columns from the Catholic Standard* by Cardinal Theodore E. McCarrick. (Ave Maria Press).

*Will There Be Faith?: A New Vision for Educating and Growing Disciples* by Thomas H. Groome. (Harper One).

*Healing the Heart of Democracy: The Courage to Create a Politics Worthy of the Human Spirit* by Parker J. Palmer. (Jossey-Bass).

*The Rise and Fall of the Bible: The Unexpected History of an Accidental Book* by Timothy Beal. (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt).

*Between Allah & Jesus: What Christians Can Learn From Muslims* by Peter Kreeft. (InterVarsity Press).

*Compassion: Living in the Spirit of St. Francis* by Ilia Delio, OSF. (St. Anthony Messenger Press).

*Isadore's Secret: Sin, Murder and Confession in a Northern Michigan Town* by Mardi Link. (University of Michigan Press).

*Tweet If You Heart Jesus: Practicing Church in the Digital Reformation* by Elizabeth Drescher. (Morehouse Publishing).

*Between Heaven and Mirth: Why Joy, Humor, and Laughter Are the Heart of the Spiritual Life* by James Martin, SJ. (Harper One).

Two reading guides:

*One Hundred Great Catholic Books: From the Early Centuries to the Present* by Don Brophy (BlueBridge).

*25 Books Every Christian Should Read: A Guide to the Spiritual Classics* (includes selections from each book) selected by Renovare (Harper One).

**Join the conversation.** All books will be posted on eCatechist.com in the category, "12 Books for 2012." Let's join together in discussion. I invite you to post your comments, ideas, insights, and questions. Let's create a year-long conversation. ■

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

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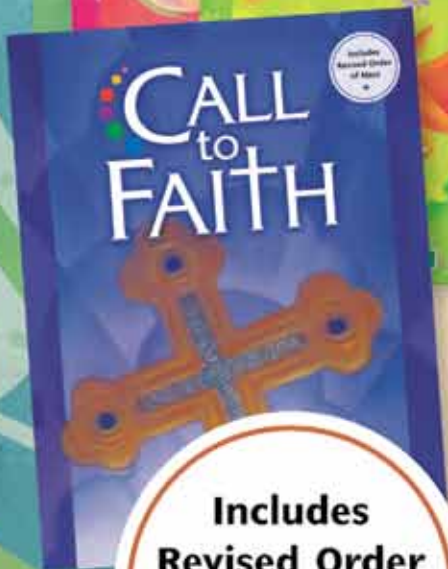
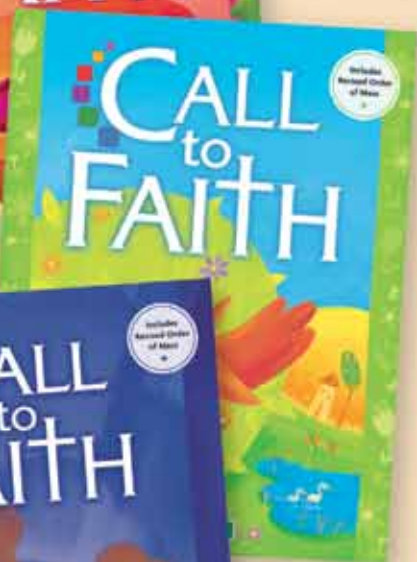
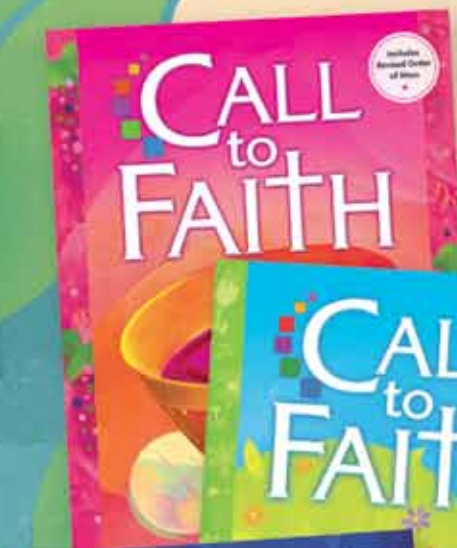
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