

The Ministry of Catechist

Forming Disciples for Today



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*“Therefore, after having taken all things into consideration, and by apostolic authority
I establish the lay ministry of Catechist.”*

These are the concluding words of Pope Francis who, in a “*Motu Proprio*” (a papal initiative) issued May 10, 2021, established the lay ministry of Catechist. Of course, we have had catechists throughout the history of the Church, as Pope Francis himself acknowledges: “From the beginning, the Christian community was characterized by many different forms of ministry carried out by men and women who, obedient to the working of the Holy Spirit, devoted their lives to the building up of the Church” (2).

But the particular urgency of this time, from the perspective of evangelization, calls for this ministry to be more clearly identified and celebrated. “This presence is all the more urgently needed today as a result of our increasing awareness of the need for evangelization in the contemporary world (cf. Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, 163-168), and the rise of a globalized culture (cf. Encyclical Letter *Fratelli Tutti*, 100, 138). This requires genuine interaction with young people, to say nothing of the need for creative methodologies and resources capable of adapting the proclamation of the Gospel to the missionary transformation that the Church has undertaken” (5).

In other words, being a catechist today is, as the saying goes, very different from being “your father’s catechist.” The massive differences in culture, even from the time of the Second Vatican Council, call for a new orientation to catechesis. We no longer have large pockets of dense Catholic culture sending children to memorize the Catechism in Catholic schools or religious education classes. Just as we no longer have captive audiences in our church buildings on Sunday, we no longer have catechetical settings whose dynamics are shaped by a defined Catholic culture. While this kind of Catholic culture looms as an ideal even in the Pope’s “*Motu Proprio*,” it seems clear that the Church’s task today means creating new forms of catechesis more than reinventing older forms.

Pope Francis writes about our pastors’ need to support catechists in order to “enrich the life of the Christian community through the recognition of lay ministries capable of contributing to the transformation of society through the ‘penetration of Christian values into the social, political and economic sectors’ (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 102)” (5). But culture today, given communication and globalization, is far more vast, changing, subtle, and elusive than it has ever been in human history. Christian values have a hard time surviving, let alone penetrating the sectors of modern life.

One way to think about this change in culture we are dealing with is through the idea of “choice.” We routinely refer to our times as being “a culture of choice.” This means that more than traditional, institutional, or familial patterns enter into the identity of people today. Our primary identity is not, say, an Irish-American living in an urban neighborhood where everyone goes to St. Patrick Parish. Today people receive their identities, such as they are, from the choices they make. As a result, little Billy, who has gone to “catechism class” for seven years, starts hinting that, at the age of fourteen, he can make his own decisions, even about faith.

Along with this value of choice, Catholics have been migrating from urban settings and small towns to suburbs for decades. The very nature of suburban life involves some kind of generic identity of a “neighborhood” whose primary function is to bring people together without emphasizing distinctness or difference. What does it mean to penetrate the “social, political and economic sectors” of populations who worry about lawns, property values, and convenience more than anything else?

In other words, being a catechist today means forming personal patterns within broad cultural processes that are neutral, and may be perhaps hostile, to the religious goals one is trying to accomplish. It means facing the age in which we live. We saw something like this issue in the nineteenth century with the long discussion about parochial schools. Did we not have to create a system parallel to public education in order to preserve the faith and the distinct identity of Catholics? Or would it have been better to send thousands of Catholics into the public school system and defang it of its anti-Catholicism in the process? Were Catholics more authentically Catholic in their neighborhood parishes and mental enclaves? Or does the breakdown of these enclaves, with the consequent weakening of Catholic identity, not prove how ineffective trying to be exclusive ultimately was? Today we must forge strong religious identity in a culture that resists just such a thing; religious identity must come from within because no one can guarantee it will come from today’s surroundings.

DISCIPLESHIP IN TODAY’S WORLD

Pope Francis says of catechists: “Only through prayer, study, and direct participation in the life of the community can they grow in this identity and the integrity and responsibility that it entails (cf. Pontifical Council for the Promotion of the New Evangelization, *Directory for Catechesis*, 113)” (6). With this phrase, Pope Francis begins to uncover the necessary perspective for catechesis today. It is way too easy to think of catechesis as the teaching of information, or, more generously, the passing on of Church teaching. Rather, **the whole enterprise of catechesis today must be reconceived in terms of discipleship**. This is why it is “only through prayer, study and direct participation” that people can be catechists today. First they are disciples who make other disciples. While an essential part of that process involves the transmission of doctrine, dogma, and information, the essential foundation of the process has to be a way of life.

The “Motu Proprio” asserts, in a somewhat insistent way, that this ministry be composed of lay people. “Beginning with the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, the Church has come to a renewed appreciation of the importance of lay involvement in the work of evangelization. The Council Fathers repeatedly emphasized the great need for the lay faithful to be engaged directly, in the various ways their charism can be expressed, in the ‘plantatio Ecclesiae’ and the development of the Christian community” (4). Of course, many Catholics have been catechized by priests and deacons; priests and deacons even go out of their way to begin catechetical projects. But the emphasis clearly, in Pope Francis’s initiative, revolves around lay people. If the “plantatio Ecclesiae”—the planting of Church—will happen today, it will come about primarily through the initiative of the lay catechist.

Perhaps this can give us a further clue into the role of catechists today. “It follows that the reception of a lay ministry such as that of Catechist will emphasize even more the missionary commitment proper to every baptized person, a commitment that must however be carried out in a fully ‘secular’ manner, avoiding any form of clericalization” (7). In other words, the very secularity of the lay state provides a way to speak to the *saeculum* (the cultural world) of people today. While Pope Francis hopes to avoid “any form of clericalization” (quite a feat in a Church that has to institute and install, title, and define, every ecclesial position), catechists need to keep their eyes focused on the secular reality of Catholics today—not the world of the third century before Christians emerged openly in the Roman Empire, not the world after Constantine when Christianity began to take on a

clear external political shape, not the world of the monks in sixth-century Europe or of the popes who reigned in glory, not the world of the Renaissance or Counter Reformation, not the circles of piety that arose in France, Spain, and Italy in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Our world today is not like any other era in the Church. Catechesis, accordingly, has to take on new forms for people today. Because one can no longer rely on a broader culture to do some of the heavy lifting of Christian morals due to today's separation of Church and state, catechesis has to be a process of helping people come to a decision about their relationship with Christ and Christ's community. As a result, catechesis will be a process of formation that extends throughout life, integrating the various dimensions of human life with the disciple's capacity to continue growing in the path of following Christ.

This means that the catechist, having chosen to be a follower of Christ and having chosen to help others make a choice as well, has to look to her or his own faith in the face of the secular reality around us in order to help Catholics find their orientation to faith today. "Secular reality" may seem to come with a value judgment, but it does not. The secular world is not inherently evil, nor is it inherently inimical to faith. Aspects of the secular world certainly present challenges to faith not only in areas of sexuality and marriage (which usually garners the most attention from Catholics) but also in areas of economics and social structure (which frequently does not get that much attention from many Catholics.) But, by and large, secularity is neutral, a beige field of associations and interactions against which faith must be called forth.

In fact, the beige quality of modern life, at least in the world of North America and Europe, presents particular opportunities for catechists today. Because modern life offers few myths (underlying theories and images) about itself, it presents the opportunity for catechists to connect people with the mysteries that can make sense out of their lives. People, after all, may well want to think of themselves, in line with some secular assumptions today, as highly evolved collections of molecules that happen to have consciousness and will eventually disappear. But, by and large, this description does not make much sense of our inner lives—our questions, our sense of transcendence, or the loving commitments we come to make as part of our human experience. Does not the profound love I have for someone invite me to see that love as part of an unbounded field of love, as part of an unending life of love? These are the mysteries of human existence that catechists can tap as they invite people to live out their faith.

Pope Francis says in his "Motu Proprio": "Catechists are called first to be expert in the pastoral service of transmitting the faith as it develops through its different stages from the initial proclamation of the *kerygma* to the instruction that presents our new life in Christ and prepares for the sacraments of Christian initiation, and then to the ongoing formation that can allow each person to give an accounting of the hope within them (cf. 1 Pet 3:15)" (6). The "different stages" are bound together by the *kerygma*, the insistence that all of life relates to a God who has been revealed by Jesus as unbounded love and who shares this love through the gift of the Holy Spirit as well as the gifts the Spirit continues to pour into our lives.

If the catechist's mission is to form people in faith, this means forming people always into deeper aspects of, and a deeper acceptance of, the *kerygma* of the Church—the proclamation of the grace of God's Good News. As Pope Francis insists in *Evangelii Gaudium* when speaking of the *kerygma* as the "first" principle of catechesis: "This first proclamation is called 'first' not because it exists at the beginning and can then be forgotten or replaced by other more important things. It is first in a qualitative sense because it is the *principal* proclamation, the one which we must hear again and again in different ways, the one which we must announce one way or another throughout the process of catechesis, at every level and moment" (164). In other words, the catechist never gets

beyond the kerygma. Instead, the catechist keeps revisiting it throughout life to find new levels of mystery, grace, and meaning.

This is exactly what the catechist has to instill in Catholic disciples today: the capacity to abide in the kerygma in such a way that the overwhelming newness of our relationship with God keeps expressing itself in our lives as disciples. Pope Francis has a simple way to put the kerygma, one that he seems to suggest as a rich source for spirituality. He says in the same section of *Evangelii Gaudium*: “On the lips of the catechist the first proclamation must ring out over and over: ‘Jesus Christ loves you; he gave his life to save you; and now he is living at your side every day to enlighten, strengthen and free you’” (164). At the end of the day, if catechists keep returning to, and presenting, a kerygma such as this—expanded and refined according to life situations—then the catechist will have fulfilled her or his mission, namely advancing our Catholic lives as disciples.

The ministry of catechist, then, occurs in today’s world (and not in a fantasy world we might want to construct) as a service to help people discover the central meaning of their lives through their experience of God in their encounter of Jesus and their acceptance of the Holy Spirit. It is a ministry of formation that revolves around a renewed sense of discipleship, both in individuals and in the Church.

CATECHISTS TODAY

“Formation” speaks of process more than content. (So does, by the way, two of Francis’s most used words—encounter and accompany.) This hardly means that content is unimportant. Indeed, the heart of any kerygma is the ultimate story in all human history with very distinct and important content, the death and resurrection of Jesus and the sending of the Holy Spirit. But content can either stay in our heads as an object of thought (as decades of memorizing the *Baltimore Catechism* showed us) or challenge our hearts to a new way of life. The catechist attends to the dimensions of formation that affect the way we live in response to the Good News of Jesus.

As a process that calls for behaviors in response to hearing the Good News, the catechist’s personal life—the life from which she or he will form new disciples—revolves around actions that become the pillars of a disciple’s life. **These pillars involve: (a) how we come to encounter, hear, and continue hearing, the Scriptures from which the Good News arises; (b) the ways we express the relationship we have with God through prayer and worship; (c) the interaction we have with other believers in community; and (d) the service we give others on various levels because we are followers of Jesus.**

Discipleship involves both exercising the actions entailed in Christian formation and, as catechists, helping others come to exercise these actions as well. Knowledge of the content of faith will definitely change as we mature simply because we ask deeper questions as we experience life. But the fundamental continuity will be on those actions that characterize discipleship, actions that a disciple has learned to incorporate in her or his life despite the different contexts of life.

In this way, young disciples can escape the trap of thinking of catechesis as “classes” that one takes to “learn” one’s faith (so that one or another sacrament can be received), the trap that leads to a “confirmation is graduation” syndrome for which we have way too much evidence. Rather, the behaviors learned as part of discipleship continue on in life, whether the passage be from preteen to teen, from teen to young adult, from young adult to living out one’s vocation—to the extent catechists have the processes of discipleship in their bones, to the extent they can invite future disciples to make these processes part of their life structure as well.

A. Encountering and Hearing the Word of God

For most believers, the Scriptures are not the actual starting point of our individual Catholic faith lives. After all, most people do not even hear about the Scriptures, the Bible, or the Word of God until they already have a basis in faith from their family lives. Nevertheless, at some point the abundant fountain of God's revelation has to open for Catholics so that our spiritual journeys can continue to be fed. The fact that celebrating God's Word comprises over half of our Sunday worship shows how it can come to ground our spiritual journey. The fact that any kerygma we form today ultimately is reprising core scriptural messages shows how essential the Word of God is to our journey in faith.

Beyond studying Scripture, memorizing Scripture, and giving an account of Scripture, the Scriptures must be heard. This involves far more than drawing one's eyes over a column of words or letting sounds hit our eardrums. Rather, the Scriptures are "read" when we absorb them through prayer, mediation, and sharing; they are "read" when they become the consciousness of our minds. Many people, including scholars, can look at the Bible as a set of words to be mastered in a technical sense. But the disciple looks to the Scriptures as an ongoing encounter with God, an encounter that leads to conversion, commitment, and relationship. In other words, the Scriptures do not reside primarily in someone's mind; they reside in the very openness one has to God in response to one's awareness of the openness God has to the person. Catechists do not convert people; the Holy Spirit does that. But catechists lead people to a space where they allow the Spirit to work in their lives.

In each cohort that the catechist is forming, there are needs, and opportunities, to help disciples read Scripture at a deeper and more age-appropriate level. In fact, a catechist might actually end up helping seniors well into retirement find new ways of "reading" the Scriptures. The process of reading the Scriptures and hearing them in a new way never stops. After all, we do not interpret Scripture so much as we let Scripture interpret us. As catechists engage the Scriptures in a variety of ways (reading, *lectio divina*, study, prayer, homilies, etc.), they find ways to help their co-disciples find ways as well.

In a fundamental way, engaging the Scriptures furthers one of the starting points of evangelization: encounter. The Scriptures put words and images on the profound, innate call that lies in the heart of every human being. They help us know what encounter is all about; they help us know how to recognize, and think about, encounter. To quote *Evangelii Gaudium*: "The Joy of the Gospel fills the hearts and lives of all who encounter Jesus. Those who accept his offer of salvation are set free from sin, sorrow, inner emptiness and loneliness. With Christ joy is constantly born anew" (1). The point here is that Scripture is not an object in itself but rather a means for an ongoing, ever deeper encounter with God that shows itself in conversion and transformation.

B. Prayer, Sacrament, and Eucharist

Another dimension of a catechist's life that will be an object of "transmission" to others involves how we express our relationship with God in ongoing dialogue. We call this ongoing dialogue with God prayer. In its multiple forms and purposes (adoration, petition, gratitude, etc.), prayer is what results when a believer turns to God with her or his whole being. This dialogue with God is both personal and communal, in our "bedrooms" and also in our assemblies. Sometimes formal and defined, often informal and open-ended, prayer becomes a central part of the consciousness of a disciple.

Catechists must not only pray but also explore prayer in its various dimensions. Just as relationships with friends have no pre-definition except the relationship itself, so our relationship with God has no pre-definition except the spiritual nakedness of our openness to the God of Jesus. Whether we are teaching children how to pray or accompanying a senior near death in prayer, the familiarity that the catechist has in her or his prayer life becomes

an essential resource in “passing on the faith.” While there clearly are teaching elements to prayer, it ultimately must flow into the ingrained behavior of dialogue—indeed, the central dialogue a disciple can have in life.

Instilling processes of prayer in disciples becomes, then, a gift that lasts a lifetime because disciples continue to be formed by the very action of praying. Each era in the life of a Catholic, each threshold, and each crisis become moments in which the reality of prayer deepens. We continue to learn what it means to ask, how we are to knock, and how seeking God becomes a way of life. Disciples come to see not that prayer “sometimes isn’t answered,” but rather prayer is always answered in the very dialogue we are privileged to have.

Personal prayer has a symbiotic relationship with communal prayer, that prayer done by a church community that sees itself as a community of disciples. While prayer such as the Liturgy of the Hours expresses a community’s desire to make all of life a sacrament, celebration of the individual sacraments become moments in which the underlying reality of grace is exposed by the “mystery” of the ritual we celebrate. We use “mystery” not to mean something we cannot understand; rather, mystery means that the meaning is so abundant that it will never be exhausted by a believer or a community of believers. When, for example, a community witnesses the baptism of a child or an adult, the event becomes the way a community can see itself anew.

This happens in a maximal way in the Eucharist in which the congregation, hearing God’s Word and responding to it, identifies itself with the self-giving of Jesus in his death and resurrection. Catechists need to see their whole ministry summed up in the celebration of the Eucharist; indeed, much of catechetical work can be seen as helping people absorb the dynamics of the Eucharist as a way of life. Receiving Holy Communion, of course, can be viewed as the “climax” of the Mass but only because it brings all the other elements of the Mass to their high point. What does it mean to receive Communion without the gathering of the people, without the Scriptures, without the offering of ourselves in our gifts, and without becoming one with Christ in his eternal praise of the Father in the Eucharistic Prayer, and without being sent forth?

The Mass can seem like a tedious ritual not only for children but, even more, for jittery teens and young adults. The Mass can also seem like a tedious ritual for people whose brains are filled with schedules and obligations that compose so much of their lives. Catechists must help their fellow believers see how the Mass encapsulates the rhythms of discipleship and, ultimately, brings spiritual formation to an ever deeper level. This can happen only to the extent that catechists have come to understand themselves in the Eucharist as if, in a way, in a mirror.

The catechist then transmits not so much knowledge about prayer and the Mass but about the relational fields that make prayer and worship possible.

C. Interaction with Other Believers

By definition, catechists have to be involved with others. They provide the Good News that is “echoed back” in the lives of those they are forming. Catechesis inherently implies, then, a communal setting, properly so because all discipleship involves community. Perhaps the individualism implicit in the way so much of America sees itself can lead to the notion that discipleship can bypass church and involve only the disciple and God. While Catholicism has certainly spawned its own versions of individualism (“me and Jesus” spirituality), even Catholic individualists go to church and sit next to others.

Faith cannot grow without interaction with others. The first community of interaction in a person’s life is the family. People, often without realizing it, receive the human and relational vocabulary from the interactions they have with others in the family. How else do we learn love, trust, struggle, support, give-and-take, generosity, and sacrifice—at least when these are modeled well? We learn them through human experience with our immediate

and extended families. We learn these even before we have a verbal language to express them. A child cries lost in a store without her mother...we feel that cry inside us, the cry of forced detachment from the ones we desperately need. This emotional vocabulary forms the basis of our feelings and our thinking. Catechesis builds upon that foundation.

The family, then, rightly earns a unique place in the role of catechesis. Its instinctive faith provides the human “stuff” upon which the rest of life is built, including faith. “Believing parents, with their daily example of life, have the most effective capacity to transmit the beauty of the Christian faith to their children” (*Directory for Catechesis*, 124). Today’s painful irony, then, involves the ways in which Catholic families stutter, at best, when it comes to expressing their faith. Often parents cannot be sure what “the right answer” is, so they remand everything to the religious professionals at church. “You’re the professional. You teach my child.” Religious activities in the household are few and rare. How do families pray in the home? How do husbands and wives form each other as disciples? How is discipleship expressed in daily life? The massive lacuna of religious behaviors in the home makes it inevitable that faith will seem an unusual thing that people experience once in a while outside the home, not the ordinary experience of daily life where it not only belongs but also needs to be.

For this reason, all catechesis of children must involve catechesis of families. And catechesis of families has to mean helping them in the formation of faith more than making sure everyone in the family knows the right answers to certain questions. The method and goal must be to foster in families the patterns of discipleship that express our encounter with God and our commitment to live our lives in response to that encounter.

If there were a blessing to the Covid-19 pandemic, it came in the way parents were forced to become involved in the religious formation of their children. Publishers and parishes created resources for parents to use in the home. Virtual sessions had parents, catechists, and children involved in the expression of their faith. The absence of the ability to physically go to church meant thousands of Catholic households tuned into one or another celebration from parishes the families knew or searched for. Sure there might have been “preacher shopping” or “choir shopping.” But before we criticize that, we need to appreciate the blessed fact that the instinct to connect with church was there in the first place.

Must not catechists today develop curricula that deliberately involve family, and extended family, in the communication of the Good News of our faith? Cannot these curricula include older children interacting with younger children and all of them interacting with adults? Cannot fundamental themes of faith be articulated in ways that different ages can appropriate them on their levels but do so in some common forum? Perhaps this cannot be the entirety of a faith formation program, but it certainly can be a major part of it.

Discipleship happens in the community of the parish as well. We Catholics form each other, sometimes for the worse but, we hope, mostly for the better. Gathering in the parish means that we witness the importance of our faith to each other. It also means that we realize faith, far from being a private experience, necessarily involves my “neighbor,” that wider community beyond my family that forms the world in which we live and show love.

How parishes provide forums for formation, for celebration, for community-building, and for service forms an essential test for the purpose of parish today. Parishes, ultimately, must reflect the Gospel that they proclaim every Sunday, from the call to recognize Jesus to the ways the community shares, includes, heals, and provides direction. As Pope Francis reminds us in *Evangelii Gaudium*: “The parish is not an outdated institution; precisely because it possesses great flexibility, it can assume quite different contours depending on the openness and missionary creativity of the pastor and the community” (28). The responsibility for this missionary creativity cannot

fall only on the pastor or parish staff. Catechists can be the catalysts whereby parishes call themselves to a clearer living of the mission that is at the heart of the meaning of parish.

The community dimension of discipleship speaks to something catechists regularly notice: groups that form around a person ultimately influence that person for better or worse. Catechists might see this mostly in teens whose peer groups can be quite intense in their influence; as a result, these groupings might advance the sense of discipleship or significantly impede it. But, in a different way, the influence of groups extends in various ways throughout life. This means that catechists can help form disciples by encouraging them in the friends and associates they choose or even, at times, discouraging some associations. They might be allies of parents in this regard during certain periods of a child's life.

D. Service

Catechists will contribute much to the lives of Catholics and to people in need by putting a clear focus on the purpose of evangelization and discipleship: to be of service to others. This focus marks the ministry of Jesus himself. The whole book of Acts and numerous references in the letters of St. Paul indicate that loving others freely in Christ was the way discipleship flowered in the lives of the first followers of Jesus. “This is how all will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:35). In this way, the focus of catechesis will always look beyond itself to the needs of others. This reinforces too the “secularity” that Pope Francis wants for lay catechists: the simple ability to look around and see the needs before our eyes to which we can respond with generous love.

The eyes of Catholics can be trained to see how others lack or are hurting; even from a young age, Catholics can recognize the power they have to care for others. Catechists will be building upon the empathy that most people learn in early family life because they can feel the pain of others and respond to it. Catechists can lead disciples at various stages of their lives to respond to others. Perhaps this might be most important once children leave childhood and need greater social skills.

While economic poverty receives some of the attention it rightly deserves, catechists can also point out other dimensions of poverty, namely social, educational, cultural, and religious poverty. The classic method of “see, judge, act”—whereby a group shares observations about a problem, explores possible solutions, and decides on a direction—which Pope Francis himself has used in his writings, can be an initial method to lead disciples in a process of responding to the needs they observe. Parishes should strive for the ideal of having every parishioner involved in one or another type of service to others; in this way, they can change the dynamic of parish life from a tendency to look inward into a desire to look both inward and beyond. We can imagine the witness parishes can give through the compassion they collectively embody.

Sometimes this display of compassion can be dismissed as simple social service or as trying to bring salvation through what is disparagingly call a “this world” perspective. But a cohesive vision of the Kingdom of God should prevent these unfortunate dichotomies, because it will make clear that any transcendent vision that we have of God includes, of necessity, the world in which God placed us. Who can claim to be a follower of God or Jesus without wanting the same love for others that God and Jesus reveal throughout the Scriptures? We remember what happened when a religious leader tried to push aside Jesus’ point with the snide question, “Who is my neighbor?” He had one of the most powerful parables spoken to him, that of the Good Samaritan, certainly one of the sharpest, yet kindest, putdowns Jesus ever employed (Luke 10:29ff).

A COMPREHENSIVE AGENDA

The ministry of catechist, which Pope Francis has underscored in a powerful way, must not only employ the dynamics of discipleship—processes and behaviors that instill the kerygma in the hearts of believers—but also think comprehensively about catechetical objectives for the parish. In other words, catechists need to reject a vision of their ministry that revolves around teaching information in a classroom to prepare children or adults to receive sacraments. Rather, they have an opportunity to envision the purpose of catechesis in the broad social patterns that we face today. Catechists can, in this way, be part of the essential agenda of making all Catholic parishes into communities of active, conscious disciples. The goal is not a sacramental event or even faith education. Rather, the Church must strive, with the help of catechists, to make the formation of disciples its basic way of life.

A. Primary Formation of Young Children

In terms of primary education, catechists cannot ignore the way contemporary culture brings children to an age where it encourages children even at a young age to push to make their own decisions and rebel against their families' values. One never graduates from being formed as a disciple of Christ. The model of the classroom, no matter how attractively presented and produced, inevitably leads to “school” metaphors being placed on formation: information, testing, passing, failing, being promoted or being left back. Our present situation becomes clear when we realize it developed as a truncated version of the parochial school, a version that, precisely because it is truncated, cannot accomplish what we thought Catholic schools accomplished sixty years ago.

Intermixing dynamics of discipleship with the curricula, including family and extended family, and offering children and families a more comprehensive vision of formation can only improve today's situation. Granted, it makes a seemingly simple process (finding “teachers” for different grades) into something that seems much more complicated because it has to involve the situation of families as well as children. But this greater complication will be offset by the involvement of parents (and grandparents) in the formation of the young child. This more comprehensive approach can help parents find language and social strategies as children move through older grades and face influences that pull them away from family and parish.

If catechists keep in mind that the purpose here is to instill the kerygma and to link this to personal growth and sacramental celebration, reinforced by practices adopted by the family, they can put the requirements of “content” into broader formational dynamics. Of course, we want children to know that the host, once consecrated, becomes the Body of Christ. But how do they understand this in relation to their prayers, their behavior, their desire to become like Christ, and their sense of being visited by the infinite love of God? How does “Body of Christ” become instinctually associated with the faith communities in which they are living? How does awareness of the Holy Spirit permeate all the experiences of children?

One of the issues here is that many of us who are older carry vivid experiences of identity with the old parochial system, one reinforced by association with priests, sisters, and brothers. Because of this, we instinctually try to replicate that same sense of identity but obviously without the environment of parochial school today. (Even today's parochial schools cannot replicate what happened in the 1940s-1970s!) So catechists have to rethink how identity can happen today, not in terms of institution but in terms of relational connections that shape people's identity, the sense they have of themselves. Looking at the age range in primary grades may help catechists think of social patterns they can employ to address formation more comprehensively.

A particular part of these social patterns is the large number of Catholic children who do not get involved in religious formation. One occasionally sees a pastor who goes out of his way to try and reach this amorphous but growing group. Given that it is hard enough to find and train catechetical teachers for direct faith formation, it

is even less likely these people will be inclined to “search the streets” for unconnected Catholic children. Catechetical leaders should, however, stress on pastors the importance of finding people willing to do this, lest we think that tending to the flock that shows up absolves us from tending to the parts of the flock who are straying.

B. Secondary Formation of Adolescents

Formation after the age of fourteen, the age around which many youth are confirmed, has been difficult for centuries. Modern life has not made it any easier. We face a generation that is tech savvy, very aware of things on TV and in entertainment, hypersensitive about personal space and dignity, electronically connected with their chosen circles, and not much inclined to like institutions. The bubbles of self-confirmation (in which we surround ourselves only with things that echo our assumptions back to us) that we tend to form around our preferences as adults seem only magnified in the socially tense world of adolescence.

For decades it has been an uphill battle to get teens into anything like “religious education.” Add to that the more pronounced phenomenon of youth becoming inactive in their participation at Mass. These are the years when people tend to reinforce identities; unfortunately, religious identity tends to get the short end of the stick because it is much easier for youth today to simply say they have no religious preference. We develop titles such as “Nones” or “Dechurched” as if they give us any insight into how to approach particular individuals in this group. At the same time, most studies acknowledge that a lot of religious-like behavior (spontaneous prayer, reading of Scripture, group sharing, spiritual kinds of reading, discernment) goes on despite what people might say about themselves in surveys.

Here catechists and youth ministers need to link up to create various spaces in which young people might connect. Some of these spaces need to be social for the simple reason that socialization is so difficult yet so important for this group to begin with; socialization is also a prime requirement for religious formation. Young people need to connect; they need to be made comfortable connecting. Some of these spaces can even be explicitly religious as the idea of “retreat” or “quiet evening of prayer” might be quite appealing to various younger parishioners. These spaces should also have a component of service because, however awkward the religious conversation might be, rolling up one’s sleeves to help another is a rather direct and attractive pursuit.

Pope Francis’s approach of “accompany” has to be a dominant part of the strategy of church ministers. Young people are still being formed; they are still in the process of shoring up their identity. They need time to do that. They need space to experiment even as we try to lay out clear values to guide that experimentation. Church ministers have to acknowledge just how messy some of this might be, but, even more important, just how essential simple and consistent presence is in the lives of young people.

One clear goal for this level of forming disciples might be this: to provide the resources whereby, through personal contact and social connections, young people reinforce their identity as Catholics and grow in practices of discipleship.

C. Young Adulthood and Beyond

The complications of maturing, which we have looked at for adolescents, continue into the next phase of life but with important nuances. Somewhere typically between the age of nineteen and thirty-nine, people will have made life-changing decisions about careers, intimacy, location and housing, and the shape of the next few decades of their lives. While doing this, people in this age group tend to be even more elusive, and harder to organize around, than teenagers because of professional and personal demands.

In this area, catechists need to link up with the leadership of the parish to develop strategies that provide religious and social resources so that this group can begin to find a place in the parish (and, therefore, the Church). One of the major factors is that young adults do not see people like themselves very much when they go near a parish. Rather, they see lots of the Silent Generation and Baby Boomers, the age groups that tend to congregate in parishes today.

Nothing will be more essential than to gather a group of people in this age group and dialogue with them about the shape of ministry. Here leaders need to be aware of the differences between married and unmarried young adults and between young adults younger than twenty-five and those who are older. Some strategies might reach across these groups, but leaders have to recognize that “one size does not fit all” and needs evolve in this age group.

Clearly, plumbing the dimensions of discipleship with this group to find out what resonates with the needs they have will be essential to doing this ministry. An emphasis on renewing conversion and commitments, deeper exploration of the Scriptures as they apply to people in transition, community contact and support, along with opportunities for service—these elements can find a wide possibility of expression depending on local resources.

Catechists, while striving to serve the continuing formation needs of active Catholics, should realize that their ministry encompasses the very large percentage of Catholics who do not participate regularly in Eucharist and the growing numbers of people who have no faith community. There is no more compelling way to serve these needs than through offering opportunities for small group sharing, which is possible once again thanks to increasing vaccinations.

This latter group deserves the attention of those catechists who serve in catechumenal ministry, particularly as ministers in the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA). People can only participate in this ministry of inquiry and conversion if they have been invited. Clear strategies of invitation and welcome must be part of the Inquiry phase of the RCIA. The “lay” part of this ministry can appeal to our parishioners, giving them resources and approaches to invite people they know who may be searching for a faith community and an encounter with Jesus.

In the RCIA, ministers who lead this ministry should have at hand the emphases of the *Directory for Catechesis* calling for a focus on the individual journeys of seekers and on methods that foster personal conversion and growth. Rather than reproducing the catechumenate in a “servile manner,” the Directory states that this ministry should take on “its style and its formative dynamism” (64). This means emphasizing how the personal appropriation of our teaching in terms of the lives of the participants takes priority over everything else. Conversation, sharing, communal prayer, and personal reflection are the primary means people become disciples and learn our Church’s doctrine. This calls for serious revision of the direction of many catechumenal ministries in our parishes, which currently is to basically review doctrinal points week by week.

THE MINISTRY OF CATECHIST

Does Pope Francis ever do things for show? Most of his writing and decisions are to reshape the structural elements that can make the Church more responsive to the needs of people today. He remarked in *Evangelii Gaudium* near the start of his papacy: “We must admit, though, that the call to review and renew our parishes has not yet sufficed to bring them nearer to people, to make them environments of living communion and participation, and to make them completely mission-oriented” (28). Who could doubt that Pope Francis, eight years later, could still pen the same rueful words?

The ministry of catechist, with its distinctly non-clerical focus, is one way that parishes can move, organizationally and organically, in the direction of being nearer to people, of being environments of participation, and, as a crescendo, of becoming “completely mission-oriented.” The word “ministry” shows the structural piece that the Pope is handing to pastors: a way to designate and train people to make the membrane between church and life much more permeable, a way to define catechesis more clearly in terms of outreach.

For almost twenty years, the thrust in the United States has been to merge catechetical staff with evangelization staff, which can be theoretically justified as both are directed toward discipleship. It is time, however, for leaders to step back and ask whether we have disempowered important parts of the evangelization agenda, namely the part of our Catholic life that reaches out, that goes searching, that invites and welcomes “the other.” Catechesis, after all, primarily defaults to caring for those who are already on the radar screen of parish leadership. Indeed, if we were honest, we would have to admit that most of those folks are, when it comes to catechesis, children.

An ardent prayer should be raised that establishing this ministry of catechesis might begin to balance the thrust of the Church’s mission: not only to those connected to the parish but, just as much, to the growing numbers not connected or who are drifting away, the *saeculum* that the catechist is specifically directed toward. The image of discipleship, with its emphasis on personal conversion and commitment, once infused into our catechetical approaches, might make this kind of balance more possible.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Fr. Frank P. DeSiano, born in New York City, was ordained as a Paulist priest in 1972. He has served as pastor in downtown New York and in Chicago. In 1990, he earned a D. Min. from Boston University, completing his dissertation on *Parish Based Evangelization*. He served as consultor for the US Bishops’ Committee on Evangelization for more than a dozen years. He has written numerous books on spirituality, discipleship, and evangelization, and frequently publishes articles in various periodicals. In 1994, he was elected President of the Paulist Fathers. He presently lives in Washington, DC, where he is president of Paulist Evangelization Ministries. He travels widely, conducting parish renewals (missions), presenting to Catholic clergy at convocations and retreats, and discussing the relationship between evangelization and catechesis. His latest book will be published by Paulist Press: *Discipleship for the Future: Spirituality of the Kingdom*. He recently published *Catholic Discipleship: Spiritual Exercises and Reflections* and *Beyond the Pews: From Parishioners to Disciples*, available at www.pemdc.org. He has been working on several pastoral tools: Pathways in Faith (Christian Initiation and Adult Faith Formation), and Catholic Discipleship Profile™. He also serves on the Editorial Board of the International Journal for Catechesis and Evangelization.



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