

Breath-Taking Responsibility, Exhilarating Challenge:
Some Possibilities and Challenges for Faith Formation Today

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Recently the question was asked concerning when faith formation “classes” should begin and end – which months/dates of the school year were the “best” for the beginning and ending of catechetical sessions?

As always, questions are good. Questions provoke conversations, cause us to delve deeper, to examine what we are doing and why we are doing it.

What is also usually true about questions is that there are other questions underneath the questions that are being asked. That is certainly true of this question.

What else is being asked by this question? Where might it be leading us? What are the challenges and opportunities for today?

Within the Catholic community, the *General Directory for Catechesis* echoes and, often, directly quotes from earlier catechetical documents of the universal Church in stating that the goal of catechesis is “to bring people into communion with Jesus as disciples. (#80).

If we are going to journey with children (as well as people of all ages, especially adults) into a life of discipleship, it doesn’t just happen in a classroom. It doesn’t just happen through imparting information. (The disciples of Jesus weren’t formed in a classroom.)

The crucial question isn’t really if it’s from September 21 through May 28 or in a parochial school for five days a week September through June. Information alone isn’t enough. What happens in a structured school or faith formation setting alone does not and will not do it anymore.

A long time ago that worked. It worked then because the formation -- the living of it, the discipleship part -- was happening (for many people) much more vividly in families, in neighborhoods, communities and parishes, and in a society which was built more strongly on Judeo-Christian values. In that kind of milieu, children (and youth and adults) came to the faith formation setting and reflected on what was *already* being lived out in their lives and all around them. The catechetical setting gave words to their lived reality.

For many people, that's not happening today. Therefore, just imparting the information isn't going to do it. Our challenge – to help people come to communion with Jesus as disciples – is about information – *and* formation, *and* transformation.

We need to have the best faith formation programs (in schools and parishes) – and for all ages, but they have to be different, very different, than what we've done in the past.

Today's realities call for new structures, new methods, new approaches.

- We need to use the RCIA as the model for all catechesis.
- We need to reclaim the centrality of the Sunday assembly.

- We need to provide opportunities for people to encounter the Holy.
- We need to help people experience belonging to the Church.

- We need to pay attention to intergenerational learning.
- We need to empower families to be the domestic Church they are.

- We need to help people feel comfortable with various ways of prayer.
- We need to help people learn by serving.

- We need to educate for the Reign of God, rather than just about the Church.
- We need to design program structures that meet that needs of today's families.

- We need to help people become comfortable with – and eager to participate in - faith sharing.
- We need to treat our presentations as an invitation to prayerful reflection.

- We need to always answer the “so what?” questions.
- We need to see faith formation as year-round, whole-community, and life-long.

- We need to rejoice that we are all catechists – and to take that seriously.
- We need to shift from an academic model to a relational model.

- We need to look for new models that meet today's needs, answer today's questions, and respect all cultures.
- We need to abandon the school model and adopt the discipleship model, rooted in our Baptism.

So the question - When should religious education “classes” begin and end? - is not really the question at all. There are much bigger questions, much larger challenges, other possibilities and opportunities.

When we think of faith formation

- why does our focus often immediately and only go to children?
- why do we think only of structured “classroom-type” programs as the only way of learning and passing on our faith?
- are we ready to look at new models to meet today’s changing needs?
- are we incorporating into all of our endeavors the best of today’s learning processes and faith-sharing methods, realizing that we are all co-learners on this journey?
- do we understand how all-encompassing faith formation is, rather than just one function of who we are as Church, as a parish?
- are we willing to look beyond our doors and find new ways to go to those who can’t or won’t come to us, especially in today’s world of technology?

Three (of the many) of today’s challenging possibilities and opportunities:

Faith formation is much more than “programs;” the parish is the curriculum.

The U. S. Bishops document, *Our Hearts Were Burning Within Us: A Pastoral Plan for Adult Faith Formation in the United States* boldly reminds us: “The parish is the curriculum...the success of such efforts (intentional programs) rests very much on the quality of the liturgies, the extent of shared decision making, the priorities in the parish budget, the degree of commitment to social justice...” (#118).

This document was written about adult faith formation, but this principle is true for all catechetics. The Gospel message is always being communicated (or contradicted) in everything we do in parish life. The parish is the curriculum; everything we do teaches. Budget decisions, the way a secretary answers the phone and responds to people, the prayerful atmosphere of all gatherings, the living of the social justice teachings of the Church, the full, conscious and active participation of everyone in liturgy, the emphasis placed on following Scripture, etc. – all communicate and form the faith of everyone in the parish.

These actions/practices, and many others, form an unspoken, but consistent and ongoing, catechetical “program” in our parishes and congregations. Do our Parish Pastoral Councils annually ask themselves the question: In everything that we are living, doing, and the ways that we are functioning as a parish, what are we teaching people – about: God, faith and life, prayer, being Church, justice and peace, living and bringing about the Reign of God?

Catechetics is not just about planning a school year classroom program; it is about the way a parish lives moment by moment. Everything that we do teaches.

“Adult faith formation, by which people consciously grow in the life of Christ through experience, reflection, prayer, and study, must be ‘the central task in (this) catechetical enterprise,’ becoming ‘the axis around which revolves the catechesis of childhood an adolescence as well as that of old age.’” (*Our Hearts Were Burning Within Us*, #5)

One of the myths concerning our faith journey that is still alive is that we do our learning when we are young. Did we give that idea, years ago, when we told people that if they completed twelve years of Catholic school or religious education, they would “have it all?”

If, in a parish today, most of the emphasis (time, budget, personnel, space, resources) is given to programs for children and youth, with little resources for adults, what message might that give? Might it be saying that our religion is child-centered; that the faith journey is a child-like relationship?

We know, of course, that nothing could be further from the truth. The “good news” that many adults need to encounter is that there is so much more for them to experience in their relationship with God, so much more potential, many more gifts for them to receive, and for them to give.

Take seriously the Vatican II principle that parents are the primary catechists of their children. Step back and look at our procedures and attitudes. Are we conveying the attitude that passing on the faith is our work at the parish, and parents are supplementary, or are we co-partners in this? A few things that parishes can continually do to be partners, to assist parents, to affirm parents in their role:

- In sacramental catechesis, schedule family days rather than parent meetings.
- During the parent times of the family days, invite them to tell their stories. Help them to connect faith and everyday life.
- Continually help parents see how they catechize; affirm them in what they are already doing. They catechize by the way they live a loving, forgiving, and caring community life as a family, by the way they recognize God in their midst.
- Help parents to learn how to pray at home with Scripture, with the symbols and rituals of the Church.

As Michael Warren stated in the Summer 2004 issue of *The Living Light*,
“Catechesis is actually a smiling invitation to join the Gospel’s dance, a dance not of
one’s arrival but of one’s way forward, toward the unnamable and unforgettable.”

What a breathtaking responsibility and exhilarating challenge!

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