

## Forming People of Compassion

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A few years ago, my niece Michelle sat on the couch crying. She had just received word that good friends of hers had been in a serious auto accident, hit head-on by a drunk driver. Her 3-year old son, Tyler, climbed into her lap, put his arm around her and said, "It'll be ok, mom, I'm here."

As our children grow, our hope and prayer is they will be people of compassion, people of conscience, people of care, people who respond to the needs of others.

What is our role as catechists in that? Especially in today's world when they (we) seem to be surrounded by tragedies and sufferings, is this a particular learning time? More than ever, is it calling us to a deeper formation of conscience that we are one Body in which we all have a role of responding, forming, and nurturing?

A teacher was showing children pictures of the earth from space. "Oh! We draw the lines."

"What do you mean?" asked the teacher.

"Look at the pictures. No lines. Look at the globe and our maps. Lines. We draw the lines. We're really one; nothing is dividing us up, separating us."

## How do we form our consciences?

In many ways. In this short article, let us look at just one. Many researchers agree that the first moral feeling is empathy. The ability to feel another's suffering or need (or happiness) is the foundation of virtue.

In reality, we have feelings because we have convictions. We have convictions because of the experiences we've had. So, the implications for catechesis are: what kinds of experiences do we need so that our moral, caring, compassionate sensibilities will grow?

## Some things catechists can do:

- Affirm the generosity and loving actions that you see children/youth already doing; there are probably plenty of them (but usually we only mention what needs improvement).

As a family was shopping for a Thanksgiving basket for the needy, the dad picked a box of generic oatmeal. His 8-year old immediately returned it to the shelf. His dad asked, "What's wrong with that?"

"We bought Sugar Frosted Flakes for us. The hungry kids out there like Sugar Frosted Flakes better than generic oatmeal," he replied. He needs to be affirmed for his sensitivity (even though it's going to cost more – but that's not the question, is it?).

- Model caring, concern and kindness. Open the door for them; thank them. Call their family when there is an illness. Every kind deed proclaims the worth of each person and the interconnectedness of humanity.
- Stress/live community. We never teach isolated individuals; we teach them as part of a community. Encourage cooperative learning, group work, circles of learning, discussions so they know one another, etc.
- Tell the stories: personal and from our tradition. Let them know the lives of our heroes and heroines. Do they know their parents' and grandparent's stories of faith and service? Invite parishioners to tell their stories of witness and service.
- Use the technique of role-playing often so they experience walking in the shoes of others.
- Frequently use open-ended stories (applying our beliefs and teachings to real life), always asking, "what would you do?"
- Don't just talk about the needs of others or make things to send to them (placemats for the nursing home); go to the nursing home, the soup kitchen. Be with the people who need us. It's the experience that forms our consciences.

- Surround children/youth with images which show unity/wholeness (e.g. the universe flag, the earth from space, etc.) rather than division/separateness.
- Study and find ways to live the Works of Mercy. Often we misunderstand “mercy;” it includes many things, such as care, making someone else’s problem your concern, and readiness to help those in need.
- We don’t have to invent new things or do things on our own; connect children (and their families) with the service/outreach events of the parish.
- Use contemporary resources:
  - Current events. Talk about what is happening. Talk about it on a feeling/empathy level. (Don’t stay limited to what is happening in America; what is happening around the world?)
  - The Random Act of Kindness movement (<http://www.randomactsofkindness.org/>)
  - Current magazines, newspapers, parish bulletins, local organizations
  - The morality lessons in your catechetical textbook
  - Children’s literature

- Always work with the parents, too. We minister to the whole family, not just the children/youth. Affirm them for all they're doing – the way they are models, the good things that are happening in their homes. Continually share with families ideas of ways to live their faith in the world.

**A challenge:**

If one of the most effective ways we help our children/youth is by modeling, by being witnesses, by the way we live, we need to continually look at just that – who are we, what are we doing, how are we doing? What message do we give our young people by our actions? Perhaps another way of asking the question: are we continuing to form our consciences, continuing to grow in our sensitivity to and awareness of our interconnectedness with all people, and therefore our responsibility for one another?

And, what messages are we giving our young people when:

- There is a plane crash or tsunami, etc. and our news reports immediately and continually focus on “there were 26 Americans involved.” Are American lives more important than others?
- After weeks of continual media coverage of Hurricane Katrina and Hurricane Sandy (rightly so), do any of the U.S. newspapers or TV

anchors go to natural disasters around the world to show firsthand the devastation? Do we insist that their towns be rebuilt?

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