

1

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE A CATECHIST?

The Directory points out that while all the baptized have some share in the mission of the Church to pass on the faith, there are those who have a particular calling or vocation to this ministry. These people are catechists.

“The catechist belongs to a Christian community and is an expression of it” (111).

There are many affirmations throughout the Directory of these two important aspects of the catechist’s identity. First, the catechist is grounded in a community and serves from within the community. Second, the catechist accompanies others as a sign of the care of the community and on behalf of the community. This can be seen as both reassurance and responsibility. Our parish, our diocese, the whole Church surround the work of the catechist, which is a wonderful support. We are also responsible to that community as “the catechist is a witness to [the Church’s] living Tradition and a mediator who facilitates the incorporation of new disciples of Christ into his ecclesial Body” (112).

In May 2021, Pope Francis issued a letter called *Antiquum Ministerium* that allows for lay people who have been suitably formed and selected to be instituted to the Ministry of Catechist. This formal recognition of the ministry will not be for all of us who serve but does raise the profile of lay catechists everywhere and recognizes the important contribution lay persons have made and continue to make to the Church’s mission of evangelization. All catechists can be encouraged by the Holy Father’s words, “Today, too, the Spirit is calling men and women to set out and encounter all those who are waiting to discover the beauty, goodness, and truth of the Christian faith” (AM, 5).

Being a catechist does not mean one thing alone; it is a multifaceted ministry. Different catechists bring different gifts to their

ministry. This has always been true as we hear in St. Paul's letter to the Corinthians, "Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone" (1 Corinthians 12:4-6).

The Directory uses many different images and titles to describe who a catechist is. Here are a few examples (113):

WITNESS OF FAITH—one who bears witness to their own encounter with the person of Jesus

KEEPER OF THE MEMORY OF GOD—one who reawakens the memory of God's saving history

TEACHER—an icon of Jesus the teacher; one who transmits the content of the faith

MYSTAGOGUE—one who introduces others to the mystery of God

ACCOMPANIER—one who is able to listen and travel with others with patience

EDUCATOR—one with educational expertise who is sensitive to others

Suggested Action

Read through the list slowly and ask yourself: Which of these seems most like what I think I do? Which is challenging? Which is inspiring me to think of my ministry in a new way?

Remember that the Directory is encouraging all catechists to see themselves in each of these ways. This is an opportunity for self-reflection and planning for personal growth.

Prayer

O God, allow us to hear your calling and to be courageous in our response. Strengthen us through our participation in the sacraments to be ever more conformed to Christ the teacher, to be catechists among and for your people. Help us to lead others to your loving embrace. In the unity of the Holy Spirit, we ask this through Christ, our Lord. Amen.

2

WHO NEEDS CATECHESIS?

Which ministries in your parish do you consider to be catechetical? Some people use the word “catechesis” only when referring to programming for children in parish religious education classes. The new Directory presents a much more expansive view.

The new Directory says catechesis is a “dynamic and complex reality” that includes “accompaniment, education, and formation in the faith and for the faith, an introduction to the celebration of the Mystery, illumination, and interpretation of human life and history” (55). That seems like a long list and certainly describes an activity that takes place over a lifetime rather than something that can be accomplished by the end of eighth grade. While the Directory helps us see this faith journey spanning the whole life span, it also helps us to stay focused on what is most essential to the nature of catechesis. The *kerygma* is the first proclamation of the faith; it is the good news of salvation in Jesus Christ that is both the foundation of the Church and the foundation of faith—the basis of conversion—for every member of the Church. Both the act of proclaiming and the proclamation itself are based on the *kerygma*. Pope Francis suggests that catechists might express the *kerygma* in this way: “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” (*Joy of the Gospel*, 164 quoted in the new Directory, 58).

Catechesis is what helps each of us to grow in our faith once there has been conversion inspired by the *kerygma*. If the Holy Spirit sows the seed of faith through the *kerygma*, catechesis helps that seed to grow, develop strong roots, and produce good fruit. That growth is a lifelong journey. Chapter VIII of the new Directory is called “Catechesis in the lives of persons” and is divided into subsections according to the life span of persons. It begins, as all our lives begin, with and in the family. It goes on to address the needs of children and teenagers, young people, adults, and the elderly. It addresses the needs of migrants and immigrants, persons with disabilities, and marginalized persons. This section of the Directory begins with the following affirmation: “Every one of the baptized, called to the maturity of faith, has the right to adequate catechesis” (224).

In this affirmation, we have three important insights:

1. We are all called to maturity of faith by our baptism—it’s something all of us need to work on.
2. We have a right to catechesis—that is, we have a right to be accompanied in our growth journey.
3. The catechesis needs to be adequate—in other words, we need the right catechesis at the right time.

The Directory suggests that the Church must offer a variety of reasonable pathways that meet the needs of people at different ages and stages and circumstances of life. It points to the need to be aware of the developmental needs of persons and their pastoral realities as well as the need to be knowledgeable about educational theory (224–25). It affirms that people’s faith journeys are not linear—progressing neatly from one marker to the next, from

one sacrament to the next, or from one stage of development to the next. That's why we need to focus on the actual needs of the persons before us in their concrete situation.

The Directory affirms the family as the domestic church and a privileged place where catechesis may already be taking place. It encourages us to lift up and support this primary place of evangelization and catechesis *in* and *with* the family even as we assist with formation *of* the family (227–31). It describes the life stages where we may offer catechesis including suitable catechesis for parents whose children are to be baptized, sacramental preparation of children, intergenerational catechesis, catechesis with teens and young adults, and adults seeking marriage preparation. The section on catechesis for adults is particularly helpful as the Directory points to the complex reality of adults today. It offers four specific tasks for catechesis with adults which are: to elicit the faith, to purify the faith, to nourish the faith, and to assist with the sharing or witness to the faith (261). Finally, this chapter provides encouragement for catechesis with those on the margins. This includes persons with disabilities, who the Directory tells us call us to work towards a culture of inclusion (271), migrants and immigrants, persons in prison, as well as for those who have fallen away from the faith. More than anything, this section of the Directory proclaims loudly and clearly that catechesis is for everyone! Even catechists themselves need ongoing catechesis. According to the Directory, formation for catechists helps us to develop as mature persons, believers, and disciples (136).

Suggested action

Make a list of all the ministries in your own parish and circle all that the Directory would count as catechesis. Then consider how they all relate to one another. How can the team who works on RCIA, and those who work with children preparing for sacraments, and those who lead marriage prep classes, and those who

offer programming for seniors learn from one another's experiences of catechesis across the life span?

Prayer

O God, help us to be attentive to the needs of your people at every age and stage. Help us to be creative in proposing new pathways that can lead seekers to you. Help us to grow in our journey so that we may come to the maturity of faith to which we ourselves have been called. In the unity of the Holy Spirit, we ask this through Christ, our Lord. Amen.

3

WHAT ARE THE TASKS OF CATECHESIS AND WHY DO THEY MATTER?

As a parish catechist, you have probably attended a parish or diocesan workshop where someone has mentioned the six tasks of catechesis. The six tasks come from the *General Directory for Catechesis* (GDC), which was our previous Directory, and are the basis of most published catechetical programs in use today. The new Directory lists five tasks. The following chart shows the list from both the older GDC and the new Directory. Note the shift in the language used to describe each task.

THE SIX TASKS FROM THE GDC (84–87)

- Promoting knowledge of the faith
- Liturgical education
- Moral formation
- Teaching to pray
- Education for Life in Community
- Missionary initiation

THE FIVE TASKS FROM THE NEW DIRECTORY (79–89)

- Leading to the knowledge of faith
- Initiating into the celebration of the Mystery
- Forming for life in Christ
- Teaching prayer
- Introduction to community life

The new Directory affirms what we have always believed: that the “definitive aim of catechesis is to put people not only in touch but in communion, in intimacy, with Jesus Christ” (*Catechesi Tradendae*, 5 quoted in the new Directory, 75) as he leads us to union with the Trinity. This is a much beloved quote from Saint John Paul II that was used by the GDC as well. What the new Directory goes on to say, however, is an important insight into our ministry. The new Directory says that such an encounter with Christ touches a person in their totality—heart, mind, and senses. It says there needs to be an internalization of the faith such that the person is transformed in their affective relationships, their community life, their liturgical experiences, and their service of others (76). This emphasizes that we become not only disciples who follow but disciples who share in a mission—that is, missionary disciples. In a sense, that sixth task of the GDC—missionary initiation—becomes the goal of the whole activity and serves as a framework for all our catechetical activity.

Equally important in the new Directory is the idea that you and I, as catechists, are also called to be missionary disciples. It says, “at the heart of the parish’s presentation of evangelization is not a pastoral strategy, much less an elite and exclusive group of the perfect and of experts, but a community of missionary disciples, people with a living experience of the risen Christ who live out new relationships generated by him” (303). It’s nice to know we do not need to be experts! But we are called to be people who have an experience of Christ that changes the way we live. We may not be accustomed to talking about our own faith in this way. As we consider our own call to missionary discipleship, it may help to reflect on what those new relationships are in our own life that are “generated” by our relationship with Christ. In the light of our faith, what new relationships do we have or how have our old relationships been affected?

Here are some relationships we may consider:

- Our relationships within our family—we may think about the domestic church that formed us and that we have formed, we may also think about how we find forgiveness, mercy, and examples of holiness within our extended families
- Our relationship to the environment—we may think in terms of our care for our common home
- Our relationship to our money or material possessions—we may think in terms of our stewardship and charity
- Our relationship to our community and the world—we may think about how we are all brothers and sisters of one another, part of one human family; we may also consider issues of justice and working for peace

Suggestion for Action

Number the tasks of catechesis from 1 to 5, 1 being the task you feel most comfortable with, and 5 being the task you find most challenging. Where can you find support to help you strengthen that most difficult task? (*Hint: It may be a fellow catechist, your DRE or lay parish minister, your pastor, a book or workshop opportunity.*)

Prayer

O God, help me to focus on the true tasks of my ministry—introducing others and leading others in growth in knowledge of you, in prayer and in celebration, as we become joy-filled missionary disciples in and for the Church and the whole world. In the unity of the Holy Spirit, we ask this through Christ our Lord. Amen.