

INTRODUCTION

In May 2021, Pope Francis announced that the role of catechist is now established as a formal instituted ministry in the Church, a ministry a woman or man would hold permanently and receive officially through the celebration of a liturgical rite.

This important announcement came in the apostolic letter *Antiquum Ministerium*, which was issued on May 10, the feast day of St. John of Avila, a doctor of the Church and renowned as a great catechist. In taking this action, Pope Francis was following the foresight and encouragement of a previous pontiff, Pope St. Paul VI, who, in his 1972 apostolic letter *Ministeria Quaedam*, encouraged bishops' conferences worldwide to consider instituting the ministry of catechist in their regions.

While this is a new official document, the crucial role of the catechist has been integral in the life of the Church in her evangelizing mission in every time and place. This apostolic letter is a

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formal recognition and affirmation of this crucial vocation shared by countless numbers of laypeople, and it will help to

- expand the Church’s mission;
- contribute to the transformation of our world and culture;
- deepen the Church’s presence in the world;
- stress the necessity for quality catechist formation;
- accentuate the missionary commitment of all because of their baptism.

Pope Francis has also said that the Congregation of Divine Worship and Discipline of the Sacraments will soon publish a Rite of Institution, which will be more than the commissioning of catechists as is often done on Catechetical Sunday in parishes and dioceses. The Rite of Institution will be a recognition by the bishop and diocese. At the same time, bishops’ conferences and dioceses will determine formation processes and criteria for the ministry of catechist.

In comparison to many other church documents, *Antiquum Ministerium* is very short. Yet much history, theology, catechetics, affirmation, and challenge are packed in the eleven short sections. The following reflections and prayers are based on the rich considerations Pope Francis has offered for us. These (and many others) jumped out for me as together—with you and catechists all over the world—we reflect on and live the privilege, responsibility, and challenge of our catechetical ministry.

CATECHIST

An Ancient and Enduring Ministry

We stand on the shoulders of many before us. From the very title of this new apostolic letter, *Antiquum Ministerium* (Ancient Ministry), Pope Francis roots our ministry in church tradition. He recalls the role of catechists in church history, beginning with the First Letter to the Corinthians, which refers to “teachers” within the early Christian community. Often throughout this short document, Pope Francis gives thanks and recognition to the many—and varied—women and men throughout the ages who were catechists.

My Ministry Connection

Catechists today are “surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses” (Hebrews 12:1), those who have lived, experienced, and shared the word throughout the centuries by their words and their lives. What support, empowerment, and challenge that gives us! We stand on the shoulders of those who came before us, sharing the Good News: Peter and the first disciples, Mary Magdalene, Paul, the early mothers and fathers of the Church, Augustine and Monica, Dominic, Thomas Aquinas, Catherine of Siena, Francis and Clare of Assisi, Charles Borromeo, Robert Bellarmine, John Bosco, John Baptist de la Salle, Catherine of Alexandria, Elizabeth Ann Seton, John Neumann, Katharine Drexel, Maria Harris and Gabriel Moran, Janaan Manternach and Carl J. Pfeiffer, Jane Regan, Jerry Baumbach, Thomas Groome, Carole Eipers, Bill Huebsch, and many of our parents and grandparents.

The long line of catechists continues; the Church recognizes many of them. For example, in November 2020, the U.S. bishops gave their support to the sainthood cause of Nicholas W. Black Elk, a nineteenth-century Lakota catechist who introduced hundreds of Lakota people to the Catholic faith.

Lay catechists also were among the Korean martyrs canonized in 1984 and the Japanese martyrs canonized in 1987. In late April 2020, the Catholic Church in Guatemala celebrated the beatification of the ten martyrs of Quiché, three priests and seven laymen killed between 1980 and 1991. Six of the seven laypeople were catechists, including twelve-year-old Juan Barrera Méndez, who helped prepare younger children for their First Communion.

In 2002, St. John Paul II celebrated the beatification of twelve-year-old Daudi Okelo and twelve-year-old Jildo Irwa, catechists who, in 1916, traveled into a region of Uganda to teach the faith to the local people. Sainthood processes also are underway for catechists martyred in El Salvador and Mozambique.

My Reflective Pondering

- How am I inspired by one of the saints who was a catechist?
Have I asked them to guide my learners and their families?
- Who are former catechists in my family, my parish, my diocese?
With those who are still living, how often do I talk with them?
Have I invited them to be guest catechists with my learners?

My Unceasing Prayer

God, ever ancient, ever new, we are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses. Help me to learn from them to teach sincerely, to care compassionately, and to trust you completely.

WHY?

We might ask why this document was issued at this time, especially when in many areas throughout the world the role of catechist has always been seen as a vocation, as a ministry.

There might be two primary answers. First, since the Second Vatican Council, there has been a growing awareness of the reality that “the role of catechists is of the highest importance” (*Ad Gentes: On the Mission Activity of the Church*, 17). Throughout his papacy, Pope Francis has continually supported the position of the laity in the Church’s mission. With this 2021 document, he continues to invite us to imagine a Church of “ordered” ministries (formal public ministries), some flowing from sacramental ordination and others because of a formal installation or commissioning.

The second answer to “Why?” is also found in the document: the presence and ministry of catechists is urgently needed today. The gospel message comforts and challenges our lives. Is the gospel message deeply embedded in us? Are we aware of—and do we live—the key teachings of Jesus:

- we are unconditionally loved by God;
- love God;
- love others and especially your enemies;
- whatever we do for others, we do for God;
- discipleship means living selflessly, serving others with humility;
- forgive over and over again;
- the importance of prayer;
- we are called to bring about the Reign of God;

- the peacemakers, the merciful, and those who hunger for righteousness are the children of God?

My Ministry Connection

The gospel message is urgently needed today. That means that we, like Jesus, need to meet people where they are. Jesus didn't teach people in the language of a carpenter (his trade). He didn't say, for example, "Let us build the house of God." Rather, he spoke in their language: "Come after me, and I will make you fish for people" (Matthew 4:19).

Jesus told the parable of the seed in good soil. As catechists, we always remember the field in which the seed is sown: the everyday lives of those with whom we walk on the journey of faith. As catechists, we need to know the contemporary world of those whom we accompany in faith. Can we spend time listening to the music, watching the TV shows and movies, surfing the internet, paying attention to the books and trends of the age group to whom we're ministering? How are we attempting to "walk in their shoes," trying to imagine what life is like for them?

My Reflective Pondering

- Which of the central teachings of Jesus are hard to teach today? How do I invite my learners to conversations about their life experiences—and how they are connected to and lived out within the Catholic story?
- What sort of conversations have I had with others in the age group with whom I am working about their questions, likes, joys, and worries?

My Unceasing Prayer

God who meets the needs of today, deepen in me the teachings of your Son. Help me connect their truth and beauty to today's experiences and challenges.

THE BEAUTY OF THE FAITH

In Philippians 4:8 we read: “Whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is gracious, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.”

Whatever is lovely, whatever is beautiful. Pope Francis reminds us that the Spirit urges us to walk with everyone who wants to, who needs to, discover the goodness, truth, and beauty of our God of infinite mystery and the rich tradition of our faith.

Along with Pope Francis, Pope Benedict XVI emphasized the role of beauty as a profoundly imperative part of the Catholic vision. Beauty is a path to God, who is the source of all beauty. When we allow beauty to touch our hearts, it awakens in us our deepest desires, our desire for the Infinite. Beauty has the ability to seize our hearts and transform us from within.

My Ministry Connection

Since beauty is all pervasive—when we are alert to it—the opportunities are limitless for us as we encounter and share the beauty of our God of mystery and the rich tradition of our faith.

The beauty of each person is respected and celebrated in the ways we reverence the diversity of each and every person. Our gathering spaces for our sessions can be attractive and lovely—even with little touches.

Echoing a 2006 statement from the Pontifical Council for Culture, the U.S. bishops have spoken of using the *Via Pulchritudinis*, *The Way of Beauty*. They were aware that young people don’t like to be told what to do or how to think, but showing examples of beauty—in art, in literature—attracts young people. How do we incorporate the beauty of sacred art, poetry, and music into our sessions and our places of gathering? Do our prayer experiences integrate sign,

symbol, gesture, and ritual, as well as the Church's tradition of music and art? Are our newsletters, emails, e-newsletters, bulletins, websites, and social media filled with good news, quotes that touch hearts, and beauty in words, images, ideas, and thoughts?

My Reflective Pondering

- St. Augustine named God in new ways because of the events of his life: "O Beauty, ever ancient, ever new..." Because of what is happening in my life right now, in my ministry as a catechist, what is my name for God?
- Is there a new name for God that is surfacing for me? Does it touch upon the immeasurable beauty of God?

My Unceasing Prayer

God of beauty, open my eyes to the beauty in my co-catechists, in my learners and their families, in my parish, and in our worldwide Church. Strengthen me to further awaken for others an attentiveness to your overwhelming beauty.