

ENGAGE EVERY FAMILY

A Parish  
Guide to  
Integrated  
Faith  
Formation

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# INTRODUCTION

The need to reimagine faith formation took on a whole new urgency in 2020 due to a global pandemic. Church leaders quickly moved to employ new technology, reformat delivery methods, and develop ways in which catechetical leaders could gather children and their families digitally. Many parishes closed their doors to visitors due to COVID restrictions. Liturgies became virtual, hosted on Livestream and Facebook Live or recorded and posted on parish websites. When churches could open, it was to 25 percent capacity, then 50 percent. Many took reservations for mass, offered guidance for socially distanced practices, and explained new policies for receiving the Eucharist. A new vocabulary entered our communications: unprecedented, Zoom, pivoted, hybrid faith formation, home-allied approaches. We navigated so many unknowns in a landscape that just kept changing. Pastors, ministry leaders, and the families they serve were living in a new world that sometimes seemed unrecognizable.

There was much suffering, from the loss of lives to the loss of work, the loss of in-person school for many children, and an experience of incredible isolation for much of our population. Families juggled the responsibilities of work, raising and teaching their children, and caring for aging parents, all from within their own homes. Our immediate worlds became smaller as we existed under stay-at-home orders, and yet, we also began to realize how interconnected we are as a human

family—how our own actions, big and small, impact those around us, both near and far.

There were blessings amid the suffering as well. Families rediscovered quality time spent together over meals and at leisure. Sabbath took on new significance as families discovered what it really means to be the domestic church. Catechetical leaders equipped and empowered parents to lead prayer and have faith conversations with their children at home. Parents created prayer spaces at home and answered questions about the mass as families watched on televisions, computers, and iPads. Families celebrated holy days and seasons at home, making wreaths for Advent, tracing the sign of the cross on each other's foreheads with ashes at the start of Lent, and washing each other's feet on Holy Thursday. One mom shared her excitement with me as she explained that her family was creating new traditions and experiencing the mass in such new ways. Like so many other parents, she was used to “shushing” the kids at mass, missing more of the homily than not, worrying about what the people in the pews in front of and behind her were thinking as one child tried to crawl under the pew and another pinched his sister, and the youngest cried that she had to go to the bathroom. She said this time spent worshipping at home helped them learn so much but also made them appreciate what they were missing. She looked forward to returning to church because she had a newfound appreciation for the beauty of the mass, for the community that she longed to be a part of once again. She couldn't wait to join others in song and participate in the elements of the liturgy that could not be re-created at home.

Coming out of the pandemic, we have an incredible opportunity to connect the home church (the domestic church) and the church of the community (the parish). How can we honor the experience families have had over these many months while inviting them back to the parish? How can we affirm the experience they've had and not dismiss it as we rush to get back to “normal”? I believe those parishes that do this well will build thriving communities moving forward. We must honor and lift up the home church that families created through

prayer, faith practices, faith conversations, and sacrifice. If we unpack this experience together, connect it back to the teachings of our faith, to the local faith community, to liturgy, create the space to listen to families, to hear their individual and shared experiences (the “joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties,” as Vatican II put it), the Church will be renewed. I am convinced of this, and it is to this end that I wrote this book.

I offer it as a message of hope and encouragement to pastors, deacons, faith formation directors, youth ministers, and other ministry leaders, and as a guide for reimagining faith formation for today’s Church. I’ll share insights from experience, research, and Church documents. We’ll explore the guiding principles that will help you make those first steps or affirm the steps you’ve already taken. Using those essential building blocks, I’ll present strategies and tips for designing and implementing an approach to faith formation that puts families first. If you’re already offering a family approach, I’ll give you tools for evaluating and adapting your model, confronting resistance, and building an entire network of faith formators in your community. There are questions at the end of each chapter (or each lesson, in chapter 2) for you to use with your team as you reflect on the next best step for your parish.

Why should you read this book? I have worked in the area of family faith formation for almost twenty years: first as a parish leader, then in a diocesan role, and eventually as a presenter, trainer, consultant, and coach. I will share what I learned in the early days of navigating this paradigm shift in a parish, the mistakes we made, and the quick wins we celebrated, and I will share the experience of communities across the country—stories from parishes that have offered some form of family faith formation for ten, fifteen, even twenty-five years. In working with these leaders, I have discovered that there is not one way to do this. One size does not fit all. It is an approach, not a program. It is a theological understanding of who families are and who we are called to be as Church today. I walk leaders through the steps of discerning the answer to questions like: What is our vision? Where do we start?

PART ONE

An  
Integrated  
Approach  
to Faith  
Formation



**The family is a proclamation of faith in that it is the natural place in which faith can be lived in a simple and spontaneous manner.**

It “has a unique privilege: transmitting the Gospel by rooting it in the context of profound human values. On this human base, Christian initiation is more profound: the awakening of the sense of God; the first steps in prayer; education of the moral conscience; formation in the Christian sense of human love, understood as a reflection of the love of God the Father, the Creator. It is, indeed, a Christian education more witnessed than taught, more occasional than systematic, more ongoing and daily than structured into periods.”

**DIRECTORY FOR CATECHESIS, #227**

ONE

# Order Disrupted

My family moved to a small town in the Midwest when I was eleven years old. It was a tight-knit farming community full of families whose surnames were Fitzgerald, Doyle, Gallagher, Delaney, or started with Mc or O'. Though I had been baptized Catholic, my formation had been somewhat limited up to that point. When one of my new classmates asked me to go to CCD (Confraternity of Christian Doctrine) with her one Monday night, I said yes. Almost everyone I'd met in this little town went to St. Joseph's Catholic Church on Monday nights. I was curious.

My first visit went largely unnoticed by anyone except my classmates. During the second, the teacher asked me a few questions. By the third visit, I received an invitation from the pastor to come to his office. Fr. Ed Joyce wanted to know what had brought me to class these past few weeks. I was obviously new to town, so he asked, "Is your family Catholic?" He wanted to know if my parents intended to join the parish or enroll me in classes. Soon I was on the phone with my parents, handing the receiver over to Fr. Joyce. Before long, he was at our house for dinner, and soon after that, we became parishioners.

Though I received minimal formal faith formation before this time (only Sunday School until I was six years old) and didn't make my First Communion with a class of peers at age seven or wear the beautiful white dress many young girls wear on that important occasion—I am grateful for the faith formation I received at home. I am thankful for the witness of faith my parents gave me, for the "simple and spontaneous manner" in which the Catholic faith was passed down to me. I learned about love and sacrifice, forgiveness and mercy, in



everyday family life. I learned prayers and Bible stories at bedtime. I learned wonder and awe on our walks, and in the backyard, and in every moment of learning about the world.

My formal Catholic education was delayed in the late 1960s/early 1970s as my father wrestled with the changes that came after the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965). But even in that, I learned what it looked like to sit with the questions, to struggle in search for answers. My parents gave me many gifts of faith practice, encouraged me in faith conversation at home, sent me to Providence Catholic High School, and were there for my graduation from Catholic Theological Union just a few years ago.

“Faith is not a linear process” (*Directory for Catechesis*, #224), and thus we are all on our own journey. My father’s journey was not a straight line; it had starts and stops along the way. His path would greatly influence his children’s paths as well. Our move to a small Irish Catholic town would be a catalyst in my own faith life, as I was immersed in a community that was rich in Catholic identity. I celebrated my First Communion at St. Joe’s and was confirmed there. My husband Rob and I were married there. Fr. Ed O’Malley baptized our children there. It was the first place I would volunteer as a catechist: when I was right out of high school and years later, when I registered my children for religious education.

When my children entered those religious education classrooms, very little had changed since I went to CCD. The classrooms looked the same. The hallways looked the same. Children came to class for one hour or so a week, about thirty weeks out of the year. The catechists read from books published for the specific purpose of forming children in the faith. Children would learn prayers, Catholic vocabulary, and Church doctrine. They would prepare to receive sacraments. This was the order of things. This was the way young Catholics were learning about their faith in classrooms across the country. We knew how to do this. Pastors and parish leaders asked for volunteers who became catechists. Catechetical leaders ran the programs and trained catechists. Catechists taught children. Leaders would tell me later, “We’ve always done it this way.”

The world around us was changing dramatically, though. It no longer supported this model of faith formation the way it had in past decades. My little town was no longer primarily Catholic (or Irish). Parishes no longer functioned as the social epicenter of the community. A maintenance model based on what worked then doesn't work in today's culture. Catholics are walking away from the faith and not returning when they get married or have children, as had been expected in past generations. It's time to reimagine faith formation.

If you've been reading the signs of the times, you already know this. In 2014, the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life published its research titled *America's Changing Religious Landscape*, reporting that "Of all the major denominations, Catholicism has experienced the greatest net losses as a result of affiliation changes." The study further revealed that 35 percent of the Millennial generation claimed no religious affiliation. Called the "Nones" (because when asked about their religious identity, they answer "none"), this group was (and is) growing faster than any other religious category.

The news was especially alarming for those dedicated to the faith formation of our youth. Young people are "going, going, gone," says author Robert McCarty. McCarty summarized the results of research done by St. Mary's Press in collaboration with the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA) in the book *Going, Going, Gone*. CARA studied the dynamics of "disaffiliated young Catholics" and the mass exodus of young people after receiving the sacrament of Confirmation. The drop-off religious education model of past generations (where parents dropped off their kids and picked them up an hour later) is not accomplishing the goal of forming young people in the faith. If we are called to "go and make disciples" (Matthew 28:19-20), at some point we have to ask ourselves why we keep doing what we're doing when we know it isn't accomplishing that goal. The pandemic accelerated this crisis. And yet, this is also why I see our current situation as an opportunity.

The call for the new evangelization has been defined as outreach to baptized Catholics who have become distant from the faith, and it emboldens us to do more to reach the people in our own pews.

Sherry Weddell's *Forming Intentional Disciples: The Path to Knowing and Following Jesus* was a wake-up call for many ministers. In 2012, Weddell emphasized the existence of people in our churches on Sunday morning who have never had an encounter with the person of Christ, though they identify as Catholic. Weddell cited research that relayed the growth of the religiously unaffiliated. The percentage of the unaffiliated is higher among the young. One study reported more distressing news: that 68 percent of those families who identify as Catholic do not have their children in either Catholic schools, religious education, faith formation programs, or youth ministry (CARA, 2015). If we are to reach young people and their families, we must rethink our methods of formation and evangelization.

The most recent research outlines even more dire statistics:

- 26.1 million Americans who were baptized Catholic are no longer practicing (*Outreach to the Unaffiliated*, USCCB)
- 26 percent of the U.S. adult population identify as unaffiliated (*Outreach to the Unaffiliated*, USCCB)
- 79 percent of those disaffiliated from religion before the age of twenty-four (*Outreach to the Unaffiliated*, USCCB)
- Americans' membership in houses of worship continued to decline last year, dropping below 50 percent for the first time in Gallup's eight-decade trend
- In 2020, 47 percent of Americans said they belonged to a church, synagogue, or mosque, down from 50 percent in 2018 and 70 percent in 1999 (Gallup)

I first began to follow this research as a youth minister in the early 2000s, when I heard about the work of Dr. Christian Smith and the National Study on Youth and Religion. Some of the early research was published in *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* in 2005, which Smith wrote with Melinda Lundquist Denton. One thing that surfaced, and that would play out again and again, was the significance of parents' influence on the spiritual lives of their

teens. Smith and Lundquist Denton said that parents matter most: “Most American teens turn out religiously to look a lot like their parents....It appears that the relative religious laxity of most U.S. Catholic teenagers significantly reflects the relative religious laxity of their parents.” As an educator, minister, and parent, this fascinated me. I knew that however we might reimagine faith formation (and youth ministry), it would have to engage and support the parents *as well as* their children.

All of this research gave reason for us to imagine new models of faith formation almost twenty years ago. Some ministry and thought leaders would do just that. The Diocese of Joliet offered training provided by John Roberto, then from the Center for Ministry Development, now of Lifelong Faith Associates. Roberto helped us imagine what lifelong faith formation might look like: intergenerational and focused on faith conversations, faith practices, gathering, sending. I was convinced of the need to engage parents. Our parish would undergo training from 2004 to 2007, making the shift to a family-centered faith formation approach in 2007. Still, in the years that followed, the majority of Catholic parishes continued to offer drop-off classes, with few to no interactions with parents. That is, until March 2020.

## **DISRUPTION**

I remember getting the word on March 13, 2020, that the Archdiocese of Chicago had released a statement:

Based on current guidelines from local public health departments, which recommend the cancellation of public gatherings involving 250 or more people, Cardinal Blase J. Cupich, archbishop of Chicago, mandated the suspension until further notice of all liturgical services effective Saturday evening with the regularly scheduled weekend services. In addition, he has mandated the closing of schools operated by the archdiocese, and to close the Pastoral Center and related agency offices until further notice.

By innovating in this space, we have the chance to breathe new life into our Church. As we explore these innovations, I'll focus on the methods, curriculum, and resources that leaders curated and created, of course, but I also want us to pay attention to the way Church leaders responded during the pandemic using digital means. And, most important, I want you to see the way storytelling can be used to build community and accompany families. When done well, this practice increases belonging, encourages ownership over one's faith growth, and empowers our people as evangelizers in their faith communities.

### *Questions for Reflection*

1. What gives you hope today?
2. How has the trend of Catholic disaffiliation affected your ministry?
3. Did the pandemic accelerate this reality for you? If so, how?
4. As you look at how you responded during the pandemic, what would you want to keep as you move forward?
5. What does reordering look like for you today?
6. How will you innovate in this liminal space?
7. How has the pandemic caused you to think differently about your ministry?
8. How do you want your ministry to be different in the future? What is your long-term vision of faith formation in your parish?
9. How do we move from just surviving COVID to thriving in our ministries?
10. What resonates in this chapter? What challenges you? Or what would you challenge?