

Shaping
the Future of
Catechesis
TOGETHER

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INTRODUCTION

In September 2021, parish and diocesan catechetical leaders were preparing for another uncertain year. Thanks to vaccines and an increase in knowledge about the spread of Covid-19, some were considering a return to in-person catechetical sessions, while others maintained virtual sessions. Even as light was starting to emerge at the end of a long and unsettling pandemic experience, there was no question about the seismic shift occurring in the planning and implementation of catechesis. The prevailing question was “What’s next?” What would the future of catechesis look like?

To address these and other questions, Twenty-Third Publications, in conjunction with Pflaum Publications, launched a series of five webinars entitled *Shaping the Future of Catechesis Together*. The first four featured a guest presenter who addressed an aspect of the pandemic’s impact on catechetical programs and those who implement them; the final webinar summarized the first four and looked to the future. Here is a summary of the series:

“Going Backward to Go Forward” • Spiritual director and former diocesan and parish catechetical leader Bill Miller started the series with a reflective session that drew participants into consideration of hope and joy.

Both, he noted, are essential to moving our catechetical efforts forward.

“Family Connections” • Popular author and gifted catechist Connie Clark noted the importance of attentiveness to the ongoing effects of the pandemic and the need for active listening. Through a process called Guided Conversations, she presented thoughtful and insightful questions for reflection based on the Beatitudes and linked to the Covid experience.

“Catechetical Old School” • Former Parish Catechetical Leader (PCL) and Pastoral Associate, Lee Danesco reminded us of the traditional values that we cannot afford to lose amid changing times. She anchored these in community, simplicity, and tenacity and demonstrated how each one keeps us anchored in a solid catechetical vision.

“If the Tech Fits, Do It” • Speaker, coach, and master teacher for Vibrant Faith Denise Utter offered a helpful exploration of the way parishes pivoted during this time by putting digital tools to creative use. In doing so, she presented exciting new possibilities that we can carry forward in this ministry.

“Moving Forward” • In the final webinar, I took the lead by weaving together the threads from the first four

webinars and laying out potential pathways for moving forward with a renewed and invigorated vision for catechesis.

All of the webinars were recorded and can be accessed at the following website: https://youtube.com/playlist?list=PLBQIZq8nIWqvCb1cNPC_URKSzDWJfFnNy. The appendixes at the back of this book are the handouts provided by Bill Miller and Connie Clark for their respective sessions.

The process for each webinar entailed input from the presenter and periodic pauses during which participants posted comments and questions in the chat box. The result was a lively and engaging conversation about the challenges as well as the discoveries, insights, and creative possibilities that arose from the Covid-19 experience. This book is both a compilation of insights from the guest presenters' materials and an expanded look at each of the five topics covered in the webinar series. Selected comments from some of the participants appear as sidebars in each chapter as part of the wisdom of the community. I am deeply grateful to each of the presenters for their insightful presentations as well as to the team at Bayard whose work made the series possible. This includes Therese Ratliff, Dan Smart, David Dzienna, Kerry Moriarty, Dave Barocsi, and Olivia Turley. Thanks as well to a great editorial and design team—Heidi Busse, Anne Louis Mahoney, Michelle Gerstel, and Jeff McCall.

As I write this, we are not yet finished with the pandemic and its aftermath. Thus, it will take a long time to digest

the effects of the past few years and how we both understood and experienced it. As such, the question remains: What is the future of catechesis? My hope is that this book will contribute to the conversation catechetical leaders, catechists, pastors, Catholic school teachers, and others will continue to have. To that end, each chapter includes questions for personal reflection and/or group discussion. Whether you are reading it on your own or with a group of colleagues and co-catechists, may it draw you further into the question and your role in shaping the future of catechesis as we move forward together.

CHAPTER 1

Onset

“Two men will be out in the field; one will be taken, and one will be left. Two women will be grinding at the mill; one will be taken, and one will be left. Therefore, stay awake! For you do not know on which day your Lord will come.”

MATTHEW 24:40–42

“For I know well the plans I have in mind for you...plans for your welfare and not for woe, so as to give you a future of hope. When you call me, and come and pray to me, I will listen to you. When you look for me, you will find me. Yes, when you seek me with all your heart, I will let you find me...and I will change your lot; I will gather you together from all the nations and all the places to which I have banished you...and bring you back to the place from which I have exiled you.” **JEREMIAH 29:11–14**

“For you do not know...”

March 2020. I was in the middle of a ten-day trip to Florida where I was scheduled to offer back-to-back parish missions along with a mid-week session for Parish Catechetical Leaders (PCLs). I left my hometown of Castle Rock, Colorado, with stresses that had nothing to do with a looming pandemic. My husband, Ron, had broken his ankle while on a trail run. Given his inability to drive, it was not feasible for him to be alone for such a long period, so we arranged for him to stay with our daughter and her family in the mountain town of Salida—a three-hour drive from our house.

The first parish mission took place without disruption, even though news of a pandemic was starting to gain momentum. At the weekend Masses, the pastor invited parishioners to follow the procedures with which they felt most comfortable when it came to sharing the Sign of Peace or receiving communion. By the time of my mid-week presentation to the PCLs, the news was becoming more dire. I am not a sports fan, but the cancellation of the season by the National Basketball Association drew my attention. So, too, did a text from my daughter, warning me of the danger of being away and urging me to return home as quickly as possible. The governor of Colorado had ordered the ski resorts closed, and the situation was clearly becoming serious. It was quickly determined that the second parish mission needed to be cancelled, and I booked a flight home. By the time I reached Salida to fetch Ron, the need to remain with our daughter’s family was evident. Not only was it safer for Ron and me, but we were also needed to help care

for our two-year-old granddaughter while her parents worked from home.

While these were certainly not the end times foretold in Matthew’s gospel, the onset of the pandemic caught us by surprise. Our story was not unique. How many others experienced a similar upheaval of their lives—at home and at work, in their relationships and routines? The isolation and restrictions imposed by the pandemic resulted in an exile of sorts. The impact was enormous. Community life was cut off or curtailed. Schools closed and health systems became overloaded. Layoffs and business closings multiplied. Fear, uncertainty, and stress levels skyrocketed. We were thrust into a time of global “not knowing,” seemingly overnight.

FOR REFLECTION OR DISCUSSION

How did your life change because of the pandemic—personally, professionally, and ministerially?

Catechetical Challenges and Opportunities

Parishes, of course, were not exempt from the turmoil. As church doors closed, online possibilities opened. Pastors, PCLs, and others who considered themselves digitally challenged were given crash courses in streaming, online classes, and other virtual offerings. The need to pivot was essential. In the webinar that kicked off the *Shaping the Future of Catechesis Together* series, Bill Miller invited participants to list the ways in which they felt challenged as well as how they experienced

new possibilities. In drawing up his own list of challenges, he included the following:

- While the virus proved deadly and contagious, there was also a threat to the mental, emotional, and spiritual well-being of populations in countries across the globe.
- Educating children, youth, and adults was difficult as virtual learning replaced in-person sessions. While the Internet provided creative possibilities, there was a price to be paid for the lack of face-to-face interaction.
- Massive unemployment set off a chain reaction, with short- and long-term damage to both households and entire industries.
- The pandemic uncovered the huge disparities between wealthy nations and poorer ones and exposed weaknesses in our educational, medical, and governmental systems.
- Many people, especially parents, had very limited time for prayer and spiritual reading due to overloaded schedules.

One challenge was apathy. Parishioners who were already marginally engaged stepped away, and the draw to pull them back in isn't there.

FOR REFLECTION OR DISCUSSION

What would you add to this list?

Possibilities arose during this time as well. Miller listed several that continue to offer potential for a promising catechetical future:

- The effort to research and manufacture a vaccine and make it accessible. In addition to making the reopening of parish life possible, there is hope embedded in such a massive cooperative effort.
- The use of Zoom and other online platforms enabled participation despite the closure of parishes for liturgy and for catechetical programs. In some cases, it provided access for those who were disconnected from parish life prior to the pandemic.
- Online programs shifted the responsibility for catechesis more toward parents. This is in keeping with catechetical documents that name parents as primary in the faith formation of their children and families.
- Creativity in lesson planning and resource gathering multiplied as new approaches were tried and tested.

Sharing success stories, I think that as we return to what we did before, we also recognize what doesn't work. Sharing out-of-the-box solutions that are working will bring the Church back together in new ways through worship, catechesis, outreach, and other means. Our needs are different now than before.

- While some felt the impact of social isolation, in some cases the decrease in outside activity gave rise to more possibility for prayer and reflection.

FOR REFLECTION OR DISCUSSION

What would you add to this list?

What's Next?

“People do not put new wine into old wineskins. Otherwise the skins burst, the wine spills out, and the skins are ruined. Rather, they pour new wine into fresh wineskins, and both are preserved.”

MATTHEW 9:17

The impact of Covid-19 on catechesis will take much more time to be understood and processed. Thus, we will continue to add to the lists of challenges and possibilities as the aftermath of the pandemic unfolds. What is clear at this early stage, however, is that we cannot move backward. Nor can we ignore the enormous changes that we underwent as a global and national community and as a church. There is no returning to the way it used to be, no matter how tempting “getting back to normal” sounds. The fact is, we are on the brink of a new normal. What is needed is both new wine *and* new wineskins. As a way forward, I suggest a *CCD approach* that focuses on three primary aspects of catechesis:

- **Catechist:** Expanding and honoring the threefold identity of the catechist as named in the *Directory for Catechesis*, along with taking new approaches to formational processes and experiences;
- **Content:** Revitalizing the message of catechesis in light of new realities, challenges, potential, and possibilities;
- **Dynamics:** Making use of new technologies while holding onto traditional approaches that are at the heart of solid and well-grounded catechesis.

The pandemic left many people feeling “unseen” in their isolation. Breaking that cycle of isolation—starting with leaders reaching out to catechetical ministers—would help us feel “seen” in our ministry. And on our part: reaching out to others where they are, not where we imagine them to be.

In the next three chapters, I will look at each one of these aspects. In doing so, I will draw upon the webinar series and expand upon the ideas and insights that arose from them.

FOR REFLECTION OR DISCUSSION

What do you regard as the “next step” in catechesis? What new wine and new wineskins do we need to move forward?