



The Emerging Vision of Lifelong Faith Formation in the Catholic Church

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A lot has been happening in the Catholic Church over the past seventy-five years regarding faith formation and the pastoral plan of the parish. Sometimes when things emerge slowly over a long period of time, it's hard to see their full impact. One sees only a small part of the whole, which can leave one lacking the full vision. Regarding faith formation in the Catholic Church, a great deal has been emerging. Slowly but intentionally over the past six or seven decades, the Catholic Church has been studying, discussing, praying about, and experimenting with catechesis. Leaders at every level have been reflecting on and creating new models for how we organize ourselves to pass on the faith from one generation to the next.

Even given all this, it can be difficult to see the whole picture. It is helpful, therefore, to pause and trace our growth. In order to make a contribution to this decades-long conversation, one must know what the speakers who came before us have had to say.

So, what's been happening? Who have these leaders been and what have they been saying? And what does all this mean for the local parish, for the parish catechetical leaders, and for families and households? As a leader, or volunteer worker, or pastor, or pastoral staff person, or bishop, or person sitting in the pews, how do you know what direction the leaders of the Catholic Church want us to follow?

We're going to do a quick survey of all that's been happening since the middle of the last century. But first, let's turn to "the back of the book" and look at the ending. What we find is that these have been the most dynamic and exciting years of renewal in the Catholic Church since the early centuries of the church's founding. These years have been ones of tremendous reflection and a convergence of thinking. At one and the same time, from many different sectors of the church, we have all come together in common thinking about catechesis.

Let me say first, though, that when we use the term "catechesis" we are referring to more than classroom teachers or catechists. We include in this term many other people. Youth ministers, for example, are catechists. Those preparing couples for marriage, or for the baptism of their child, or for confirmation—all of these are catechists. But beyond that, when a parish volunteer goes to visit an ill member of the parish, taking communion with him or her, what happens in that visit is terribly important. When she sits down on the edge

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of the bed and invites the ill person to talk about their sickness, and about all the surrounding ramifications, that pastoral worker is a catechist. He or she is helping the patient make sense out of this illness, to understand the illness in light of faith, to grapple with the great human mystery of suffering, even with dying. Such work, to understand and find meaning in life and death – that’s a strongly catechetical ministry.

The same can be said about those who work in the funeral ministry, or those who visit the prison, or those who do outreach to the immigrant, the newcomer, the widow, the orphan, or the stranger. Catechesis is about much more than what happens to a child in the classroom. It’s about the whole parish, as a body working through its individual members, forming and shaping faith.

Parish catechetical leaders have also long understood the importance of the parents in faith formation. They know it’s impossible to be effective if the parents aren’t integral to their children’s formation. At the same time, church documents point to this same reality with great force. From the Second Vatican Council to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* to the *General Directory for Catechesis*, the parent is named as the primary player in the passing on of the faith from one generation to the next. And while parish leaders and bishops were saying this, Catholic lay leaders and publishers were getting ready a whole new generation of resources to make such a role for parents possible.

Tremendous renewal is unfolding now. So whether we’re speaking of children’s religious education, adult faith formation, the RCIA, pastoral care, outreach, or any other form of catechesis, we are in a period of tremendous renewal and reform. It’s always hard to understand the historic significance of the moment in which one lives. But history will look back on this moment, I think, and see a turning point. The whole church is re-enlivened by a more dynamic understanding of catechesis! The whole church is beginning to realize that the parish itself is the teacher, by how it believes and behaves. No longer merely an enterprise for children, now every member of the church is seen as being in formation throughout life, at every age and stage.

Remarkable, isn’t it? From every corner of the Catholic Church we’re all calling for the same development in faith formation. To me, it’s inescapable that the Holy Spirit is guiding this movement.

And this has been true in every dimension of catechesis. As we articulate the principles for catechesis that emerge from all the work of the past seventy-five years, we find that they are held in common by all: bishops, diocesan leaders, pastors,

parish leaders, and households themselves, who are responding to a new invitation to grow in their faith. This new sense of direction has the power to really effectively announce the reign of God, to provide a true spiritual home for people of all nations, and to chart the course for justice and peace that is the dream of the gospels.

Indeed, the strong work of the past seven decades provides a clear sense of direction for the church. But you will have to be ready to embrace the change in parish structure needed to bring this all about. Whatever role you play, whether you’re the bishop or a diocesan staff worker overseeing your whole diocese or a parish worker focused more directly on one community of that diocese, the work of implementing this bold new sense of direction, this bold new pastoral plan, falls now to us.

At the Council

On the eve of Vatican II, the pastoral plan of the Catholic Church seemed quite simple. Bishops and pastors provided all the leadership, while Sisters and Brothers handled the education and health care systems of the church. Lay people attended Mass weekly, followed the moral and devotional direction set for them by the leaders, and used the sacrament of confession to reconcile themselves if they went astray.

“Fallen away Catholics” were a small number, and were generally treated as lost souls.

Catechesis was based solely on the *Catechism* itself, where answers to specific questions of faith and doctrine were memorized along with prayers, lists, and other details of Catholic life. By and large in the United States, and many parts of the world, Catholics lived what was known as a “Catholic life.” Everyday life was imbued with Catholic customs, beliefs, and traditions. So much was this the case that “catechism class” (as it was known in some parts of the church) had only a very small gap to fill. The actual instruction was done through all the other means: home life, devotions, traditions, personal piety, fasting, abstinence, and obedience to church norms, and of course, weekly or daily Mass attendance.

The pastoral plan for parishes had remained essentially the same since the sixteenth century. There had been so little change, in fact, during those four or five hundred years that when the bishops and theologians at Vatican II did begin to reform the Catholic Church, it came as quite a shock to many people. Having been held in place for so long by the sheer force of the discipline of the church’s leaders and the threat of hell, that old “Catholic life” now

began to unravel and the need for a more vigorous catechesis became strong.

Here was Vatican II calling for “full, active, and conscious participation in the liturgy.” Lifelong catechesis would be needed. Vatican II was calling for lay people to engage the world and contribute to it from their faith. Lifelong catechesis would be needed. Vatican II spoke about a “universal call to holiness.” Lifelong catechesis would be needed. Vatican II led us toward charitable and prayerful ecumenical and interfaith relationships and dialogue. Lifelong catechesis would be needed. Vatican II described conscience as the place “where we are alone with God whose voice echoes in our depths.” Lifelong catechesis would be needed. Vatican II restored the catechumenate, which had not been active in the Catholic Church for nearly seventeen hundred years. Lifelong catechesis would be needed. Vatican II restored our understanding of baptism as “the essential sacerdotal sacrament.” Lifelong catechesis would be needed.

Do you hear a theme emerging here? If indeed the church renewed by the Council was to become a reality, the secret strategy would be lifelong catechesis. At every age and stage of life, Catholics would have to grow in our faith. Gathering in multi-generational ways, Catholics would learn new ways to allow the liturgy, the social teachings, or the pastoral care work of the church to teach them what it means to be church in the first place.

But in fact, the Catholic Church did not have a tradition of catechesis when the Council convened. There were catechisms to memorize. Memorization is certainly part of any form of learning, but no one would seriously argue that it is sufficient to have mere cognitive recognition of doctrine and tradition. And these catechisms were aimed almost exclusively at children and “converts.” Again, no one is seriously arguing that it’s enough to address only the catechetical needs of children, ignoring everyone else.

There must also be a strong element of the emotive and intuitive. The heart must be committed to Christ if one’s faith is strong. We do not, after all, place our faith in the Catholic Church itself. The church is not God. And there must be formation for us all, throughout life.

So at Vatican II itself, not much debate about catechesis was held. The Catholic Church had long hoped to engage all adults in the catechetical process. The Confraternity of Christian Doctrine (CCD) was created as a “whole community” approach, intended to activate adults in the work of the church. But it had quickly become only a children’s program. Of course, we could count then on that so-called “Catholic life,” but after the Council in the United States and other parts of the

first world, social changes on every level caused that “Catholic life” to fall into steep, sudden, and unforeseen decline.

In fact, at the Council, the only direct reference to catechesis comes in article forty-four of the “Decree on the Pastoral Office of Bishops in the Church.” There it calls for a series of “general directories” to be drawn up after the Council. These were to address, for example, the care of souls, the pastoral care of special groups, “and also a directory for the catechetical instruction of the Christian people in which the fundamental principles of this instruction and its organization will be dealt with....”

An International Catechetical Movement

The Council Fathers were aware that a catechetical renewal was already afoot throughout the world. The search was already underway for a better method than the questions and answers of the catechism. In the early 1900s, catechetical leaders meeting in southern Germany were testing new methods. They recognized that merely knowing facts about the faith was not the same as encountering Christ and hearing the gospel proclaimed!

The so-called “kerygmatic movement” of the 1950s went even further, moving us to recapture the spirit and vision of the church of the apostolic and patristic era. This movement added the element of “formation” to the memorized catechism. Learners received the proclamation of the gospel, the teachings of Jesus and the saving acts of his life, death, and resurrection.

This movement was based on “four signs” that were to be in balance if a proper understanding of the faith was to be the result:

- Liturgy
- Scripture
- Church teaching
- Witness of Christian living

Catechesis was no longer limited to instruction and to the classroom. Instead, it merged with liturgy, biblical study, and discipleship into an organic whole, just as it was experienced in the early church. We are grateful to Josef Jungmann, SJ (1889–1975), who taught pastoral theology on the faculty of the University of Innsbruck, for these insights, which are part and parcel of all effective catechesis today.

In the United States, Jungmann’s work was popularized by Johannes Hofinger (1905–1984). It

was mainly by Hofinger's efforts that a series of international catechetical study weeks were held in

- Nijmegen, 1959
- Eichstatt, 1960
- Bangkok, 1962
- Katigondo, 1964
- Manila, 1967
- Medellin, 1968

These study weeks anticipated Vatican II and continued during and after it. They influenced the Council itself. The Eichstatt week had particular influence as it laid out principles of liturgical and catechetical renewal. But it was at Medellin, Columbia, in 1968 that serious reflection on evangelization led to a new focus. It was seen during the week in Medellin that we cannot presuppose faith in members of the church. Baptism is no guarantee that people have come to encounter Christ and adhere to him and the church with their whole hearts.

Following on all of this, in 1971, the Catholic Church published the *General Catechetical Directory* which provided a framework on which a great deal of catechetical renewal was built. This directory reflected all the work done to that point at the various study weeks and at the Council.

This first general directory was enculturated in the United States by way of a pastoral message issued by the US Catholic bishops in 1972, called *To Teach as Jesus Did*, which provided the impetus for much growth in catechesis in this country. In this document, the US bishops said, in article forty-three, "Today it is important to recognize that learning is a lifelong experience." The bishops were setting the stage for a new pastoral plan for the Catholic Church, one that includes more than children's religious education. They went on in this document to call for balance among all the elements of catechetical need within the parish: adults, youth, schools, children, and others.

Hmmm... balance. What would that look like for American Catholics, unaccustomed to catechesis for anyone other than children and youth? How would parishes balance their plan, retaining solid catechesis for the young while adding it for adults?

The bishops were laying the groundwork for an approach to catechesis that addressed more than children. Indeed, to be successful with the children in the first place, we know that their parents must be involved at every level of faith formation! Without the parents, all our efforts amount to "seed falling on rocky ground." Faith will sprout because of our efforts, but the real harvest of faith can only be sustained within the home.

Evangelii Nuntiandi

In 1974, an international synod of bishops dealt in great depth with the question of evangelization raised at Medellin, but they did not publish any outcomes. Instead, they encouraged Pope Paul VI to reflect on their findings, which he did, publishing an apostolic exhortation in 1975, *Evangelii Nuntiandi* or, in English, "On Evangelization in the Modern World."

The church received this document with tremendous grace. At the time, it was arguably the most important document issued in the Catholic Church since the close of Vatican II. It is concise (only five chapters long), vibrant, readable, and profound. In article four Paul VI posed his leading question: "At this turning point of history, does the Church or does she not find herself better equipped to proclaim the Gospel and to put it into people's hearts with conviction, freedom of spirit, and effectiveness?"

Notice this question. It is a thoroughly modern concern, rooted in today's situation. It is challenging. It is Christocentric and focused on the gospel, the *kerygma*. And it is powerful: do we have conviction? Is there freedom of spirit? And, mainly, are we effective?

Most importantly, this document marked a turning point for pastoral planners. Whereas in the past, the concern was for Catholics to be thoroughly familiar with the Catholic Church, its teachings, laws, liturgies, and traditions, now the concern shifts to something more Christocentric. For Catholics, do you know Christ? Have you experienced the life-changing power of an initial encounter with Christ? In other words, have you been "converted?" Conversion to Christ of this sort, the *General Directory for Catechesis* would later argue, precedes catechesis (article 62).

Christocentric Catechesis

This key turning point has led to decades of work on "evangelization." For Catholics, this is a difficult term. Catholics don't know much about conversion to Christ. And yet, if you examine the message of Pope John Paul II, you'll find him to be much more Christocentric than ecclesiocentric. Everywhere he went in the world—at clergy gatherings, in meetings of men and women religious, in preparation for the Jubilee Year, at academic meetings, youth rallies, or Masses for the throngs—his message was similar: "Come to Christ. Do not be afraid. Give your heart to Christ. Open wide the doors to Christ."

He saw Christ as the Lord of the universe and the center of all humankind. It was fundamental to him. I believe it was an insight that he himself gained through the Spirit.

In 1977, a second international synod of bishops met in Rome with catechesis as its focus, no doubt preparing to draw up that directory which had been called for at the Council. As the synod ended, the bishops issued a message to the people of God regarding their findings, and they also sent a set of resolutions to Pope Paul VI. Two years later, in 1979, Paul John Paul II issued the apostolic exhortation, *Catechesi Tradendae*, or in English, “On Catechesis in Our Time.”

This exhortation laid the groundwork for a high level renewal of catechesis in today’s church. It begins by reiterating what Paul VI had said earlier, that catechesis is Christocentric and it is rooted in tradition. Evangelization is the overarching activity, and catechesis is one dimension of that. The main sources, as directed by Vatican II’s *Dei Verbum*, or in English, “The Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation,” are Scripture and tradition. It also treats various practical aspects of catechesis and concludes by saying, in essence, that catechesis isn’t just for children; *it’s for everyone*.

And of course, once again, this document proclaimed that the definitive aim of catechesis is “to put people not only in touch but in communion, in intimacy, with Jesus Christ....”

And Finally, the GDC!

Then in 1997 the *General Directory for Catechesis* was published. Drawing on the wisdom and spirit of all the work mentioned above, and much that is not mentioned here for the sake of brevity, the GDC provides sound, workable principles on which to our current work in catechesis.

Whole community catechesis arises from the GDC. The name itself, “whole community,” comes from article 254 where it says, “The whole Christian community is the origin, locus, and goal of catechesis. Proclamation of the Gospel always begins with the Christian community and invites [people] to conversion and the following of Christ.”

The *General Directory* laid out certain principles to follow, and these have led to the development of

- an understanding of the catechumenate as the model for all catechesis
- an understanding of the parish as the primary “educator”
- the centrality of an encounter with Christ as the basis for catechesis

- the key role households must play in catechesis
- a much stronger link between liturgy and catechesis
- an appreciation for intergenerational catechesis
- lifelong catechesis
- all catechesis leading to work for justice and peace

The US Catholic bishops have taken up both the spirit and the letter of the international and papal documents with great fervor. In *Our Hearts Were Burning Within Us* (1999),” the bishops said:

We, as the Catholic bishops of the United States, call the church in our country to a renewed commitment to adult faith formation, positioning it at the heart of our catechetical vision and practice. We pledge to support adult faith formation without weakening our commitment to our other essential educational ministries. This pastoral plan guides the implementation of this pledge and commitment. (#6)

The US Catholic bishops join other conferences of bishops around the world in calling for adult catechesis to be the new norm in parish life. The church—leaders, workers, people—is seeking a way for parishes to bring adults into the circle of catechesis within each parish, to provide formation for the *whole community*. It is not a shift *away* from children. It is a shift to a wider circle, a more inclusive method which adults as well as children will appreciate.

Many Voices; One Vision

Swimming around and throughout this work at the papal and Episcopal level has been a set of parallel and vital developments. Leaders such as John Roberto, Jim DeBoy, Fr. Berard Marthaler, Tom Groome, Jane Regan, and Sr. Kate Dooley, OP, were leading the way into models of catechesis aimed at the whole community. Their very practical work was met with a warm welcome at the parish level of the church, where catechetical leaders were eager to experiment with methods to reach adults. Let’s review what these leaders have been saying.

Francoise Darcy-Berube, writing in *Religious Education at a Crossroads* asked this powerful question:

How can we provide a diversified, flexible, and ongoing support system for the development of a quality Christian life in the young of our communities, in their families, and in the adult population? [How can we provide] a much closer,

personalized, diversified and lasting cooperation with the families of these youngsters, and a more efficient support network made up of meaningful, personal, inter-generational relationships and of a variety of small intentional communities within the larger community? (20–21)

At the same time, Sr. Kate Dooley was making a connection with liturgy. She wrote that “Catechesis is gradual and ongoing; it takes place in and through the Christian community in the context of the liturgical year and is solidly supported by celebrations of the word.”

Dick Reichert, formerly of the Diocese of Green Bay, laid out the challenge in the National Conference of Catechetical Leaders (NCCL) newsletter *Update*, published in April 1994, when he wrote, “The real challenge contained in the pursuit of alternative models is to create a radical new paradigm of catechesis. It cannot simply be a process of going back to the past or making surface modifications of the present models.”

Echoing the strong, new, and urgent need to help those being catechized also be evangelized, Chris Weber wrote: “The baptismal catechumenate is first and foremost about bringing participants into relationship with Jesus Christ and helping them turn to him with their whole hearts. Is this task the first priority of the catechetical programs in our parish or school?” (*Catechetical Leadership*, vol. 12, no. 2).

And Fr. John Hurley, CP, now the director of the National Pastoral Life Center in New York, said this: “Why do catechists catechize? It is not just to transfer knowledge and teachings. It is to call others to be witnesses and disciples of Jesus Christ. Of course, this requires that our catechists be witnesses and disciples....If catechists have not experienced an encounter with Jesus, then how can they “talk the talk” with other people?...If they *have* encountered the Lord personally, then they can’t keep that a secret.”

Meanwhile, John Roberto was busy gathering a team and launching a movement for intergenerational catechesis with the Center for Ministry Development. Called “Generations of Faith,” this approach was a resource to help parishes accomplish the goal of allowing the parish itself to become the teacher. He wrote, “The current programmatic and age-specific approach to childhood and adolescent faith formation that has characterized the efforts of so many parishes over the past thirty years, is simply not adequate. It may be one of the models of faith formation in a parish, but it cannot be the only model. It is time to broaden our vision and our practice.”

And echoing John, National Catholic Educational Association scholar Steve Ellair wrote:

“Hope for renewing an intergenerational vision and nurturing intergenerational learning is not beyond our reach. We are, by nature, intergenerational.... Our “school-mode” applications of religious education lead to more cognitively focused “classrooms.” This approach can lead to a de-emphasis on the affective and behavioral dimensions of learning and produce children who can recite prayers and church doctrine, but who have little or no commitment to church...Intergenerational learning is by nature experiential and relational.”

Catholic publishers were likewise weighing in and adding to this growing consensus. Cullen Schippe, at a 1999 conference in La Jolla, California noted: “Catechesis has always been much more—oh, so much more!—than the handing down of doctrine. It has always been more than a body of categorized knowledge to be retained. The ultimate goal of all catechesis, after all, is adult Christians of mature faith.” Peter Phan, at that same conference, reminded the audience that “You cannot talk about religious education except as a process involving the whole community.”

Maybe a pastor summed it up best. At a gathering to commemorate the anniversary of *To Teach As Jesus Did*, Monsignor Richard Burton, pastor of St. Anthony Parish in Washington, DC, and a pioneer in lifelong catechesis, said simply and straightforwardly, “The parish is the catechist.” And the *General Directory for Catechesis*, published in Rome in 1997, agreed! Those to be catechized cannot be passive recipients, it said in article 157. They must be actively engaged in the process through prayer, participation in the sacraments, the liturgy, parish life, social commitments, works of charity, and the promotion of human values. Catechesis, after all, is a process of taking on *a way of life and personal conversion*, not the acquisition of a body of information.

It’s hard to find a scholar or publisher who does not agree. Dr. Gabe Moran, writing with his late wife Maria Harris in their seminal book *Reshaping Religious Education*, wrote: “Religious education...includes giving reasons and explaining. But it also includes teaching by communities in nonverbal ways and teaching by the nonhuman universe.”

Dr. Jane Regan of Boston College suggested that “Imagining an alternative vision of catechesis, one in which the adult community is invited into the process of transformation, is the first step that needs to be taken as we move into the next millennium.”

John Paul II himself reminded us that “Catechesis always has been and always will be a work for which the whole Church must feel

responsible and wish to be responsible” (*Catechesis Tradendae*).

As Catholic publishers began to understand and embrace the shift toward lifelong catechesis, they became leaders as well. Diane Lampitt, president at Harcourt Religion Publishers, wrote this recently: “Just as an artist needs the right tools to create a masterpiece, we as partners in ministry need the right tools for engaging the whole community in lifelong catechesis.”

And finally, just to round out this quick and incomplete survey of growing consensus, here is how Sr. Edith Prendergast of the Archdiocese of Los Angeles and a pioneer in lifelong faith formation, puts it: “Foundational to all of this is an ecclesiology of communion. We are called to a *communio* of ordered relationships....This brings us to understanding the parish as a web of interlocking relationships all focused on the community as a learning, questioning, celebrating, welcoming and evangelizing community of faith. Key to developing whole community catechesis is visionary and shared leadership that holds out promise, hope, and which inspires the new.”

Can you see patterns of agreement and convergence here? Each working from his or her own perspective, church leaders have joined mind and heart in a common cause, drawn together by the Holy Spirit and sustained by each other. The Catholic Church is making an historic turn to lifelong faith formation and catechesis, rooted in an encounter with the person of Jesus Christ, and lived in the church.

And this, in turn, leads us to a new urgency for pastoral planning. What plan can we undertake that will deliver these goals to us? How will we at once sustain and improve children’s catechesis while also providing intense, systematic, and comprehensive catechesis for people of all ages within the parish? Indeed, this is the most vital question before us now!

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