



Total Community Catechesis for Lifelong Faith Formation

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Christian religious educators must be committed to lifelong faith formation of our peoples and of ourselves. Further, this requires both intentional socialization and reflective education by a total Christian community; it takes a village with a school—of some kind. Of course, so much depends on what we mean by “Christian faith,” so let me begin there.

My concern as a religious educator is not an abstract definition but a description of existential Christian faith, of its evident aspects when realized in the life of a person or community. When incarnated so, Christian faith is itself a *total* affair. With the help of God’s grace, the intent of the catechetical educator¹ should be Christian faith, 1) that engages and permeates people’s *heads, hearts, and hands*; 2) that is *lived, living, and life-giving* for all; and 3) that is ever being *informed, formed, and transformed* in discipleship to Jesus in a community of disciples for God’s reign in the world.

1. We readily recognize Jesus’ “totalizing” of discipleship in how he preached and lived the Great Commandment. Consistent with his own Jewish faith, he taught that “you shall love the Lord, your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength” (Dt. 6:5), in other words, with our total being. However, he explicitly coupled this with “you shall love your neighbor as yourself” (as in Lv. 19:18), and radicalized “neighbor” to include even enemies and those who hate us (see Lk. 6:27–36). Thus, Christian faith is realized as we love God by loving all others as ourselves, and this must engage and permeate our heads, our hearts, and our hands (virtues and ethics): our total personhood.
2. Jesus’ call to discipleship was to “follow the way,” to embrace a *lived* faith. It is not enough to confess Jesus as Lord; one must also do the will of God (see Mt. 7:21). The true family of Jesus “are those who hear the word of God and act on it” (Lk. 8:21). Likewise, it should be a *living* faith, vibrant and growing, ever drawing upon the “living waters” that Jesus promised to the Samaritan Woman at the well, and to Christians ever after (see John 4). And always, Christian faith should promote “life more abundantly” (Jn. 10:10), not only for Christian persons and communities but “for the life of the world” (Jn. 6:51) as well.

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3. Being *informed* in Christian faith includes but means more than knowing “about” it. Indeed we should know well and understand its data; beyond this, however, we must come to embrace it as our own out of personal conviction and let it guide every decision we make. *Formation* in such faith pertains to our very “being” as both noun and verb; it should shape who we are and how we live our lives. This means “becoming” like Jesus Christ, embracing “the way” that he modeled and made possible, living Christian values and virtues as integral to our personhood. And *transformation* calls Christian persons and communities to a never-ending process of conversion into holiness of life after the way of Jesus. This and all of the above calls us to discipleship in a community of Jesus’ disciples, and likewise to the abiding work of transforming our church, society, and world toward God’s reign.

If the journey of such faith could have a point-of-arrival this side of eternity, we could assign its catechetical education to a particular age group, with a beginning and end. But, to echo the opening lines of Augustine’s *Confessions*, our heart’s desire is never fully satisfied until we rest in God. Such *total* faith requires what the *General Directory for Catechesis* (Vatican Congregation for Clergy, 1998, hereafter *GDC*) repeatedly mandates as “permanent catechesis.” Further, such *total* faith cannot be initiated, sustained, and developed—lifelong—except by the intentional socialization and reflective education of a Christian community. Throughout the remainder of this essay I will attempt to describe a generic approach to such socialization and education in faith that I name as “total community catechesis” (hereafter TCC).

First, an explanation of *total* in TCC. I note immediately that *whole* community catechesis is also a favored name for this emerging approach and I find this entirely acceptable; whether called *whole* or *total*, this is the same worthy movement, one surely prompted by the Holy Spirit. However, when I first began to advocate TCC some 20 years ago, and in my first published essay proposing it (see Groome, “Parish as Catechist” in *Church*, Fall, 1990), I used the word “total” for some good reasons. It suggests that the church’s catechetical ministry should engage every baptized Christian in the reciprocal dynamics of teaching and learning their faith together. Likewise, *total* should encourage Christian communities to harness the catechetical potential of every ministry and aspect of their life in faith.

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community catechesis as an intentional coalition of parish, family, and programs/school that engages every member and all aspects of each unit, by and for people of all ages, teaching and learning together by and for people of all ages, teaching and learning together for total Christian faith toward God’s reign in the world.

Instead of catechesis as one slice among others of community life, we need a 360-degree approach: *total*. And it echoes the totalizing demands of Christian faith that were already outlined above. This being said, I understand total community catechesis as an intentional coalition of parish, family, and programs/school that engages every member and all aspects of each unit, by and for people of all ages, teaching and learning together for *total* Christian faith toward God’s reign in the world.

Warrants for TCC and Lifelong Faith Formation

Every community of faith, whatever its religious tradition, would do well to practice such a total approach to lifelong faith formation. However, since the challenge is to implement it within particular communities, each must find the warrants within their own theological framework. For this reason, I draw primarily here from my Catholic Christian tradition. To begin, and when at its best, Catholicism emphasizes the totalness of Christian faith. The *Baltimore Catechism* had it right; the very purpose of human existence is *to know, love, and serve God* in this life (head, heart, and hands), and the journey does not end until we are happy with God forever in the next—a total and lifelong affair.

Likewise, that Christian faith be lived, living, and life-giving for the life of the world reflects the Catholic conviction that faith alone saves as it is realized in daily life, including the good works of compassion and justice for all. Catholicism has always preferred to read James’ insistent repetition that “faith without works is dead” (James 2)

alongside of Paul's unbounded confidence that we are "justified by faith" (Romans 5:1).

Further, a constitutive aspect of Catholicism is the centrality of church and community to the life of Christian faith. We go so far as to claim that the bond of baptism is never broken, not even by death, uniting the church on earth with those gone ahead, with all interceding for each other as needed. And though conversion can occur as a cataclysmic experience—like Paul's on the road to Damascus—Catholicism understands conversion as more typically a lifelong process. Even the greatest saints were keenly aware of their need for growth in holiness of life. The very title of Chapter 5 of the Second Vatican Council's document *Constitution on the Church* reflects that every Christian is called by baptism to lifelong growth into discipleship: "The Call of the Whole Church to Holiness." Vatican II's reclaiming of a radical theology of baptism—as if it is the root (Latin *radix*) of our identity—also points to the need for lifelong socialization and education in faith, to be done by the total faith community. For example, "The baptized, by regeneration and anointing of the Holy Spirit are consecrated into a spiritual house and a holy priesthood" (*Constitution of the Church* #10). All the baptized are "sharers in the priestly, prophetic, and kingly functions of Christ...in the mission of the whole church (to) the world" (#31). Such statements are a clarion call to a new level of co-responsibility for our faith; rather than being divided into agents and dependents, we are all responsible together: a total community affair. As and through the total faith community, we need "permanent catechesis" (GDC) or lifelong faith formation.

Add, too, the great legacy of Pope John Paul II in his championing of "a new evangelization." Gone are the days when we can limit evangelization to what missionaries do in foreign lands. Instead, every Christian person and community is required—again by baptism—both *to evangelize* and *to be evangelized*. And the emphasis is no longer on "bringing them (newcomers to the church) in," but on "bringing us out," calling Christians to live our faith in the marketplace of life, to have it permeate every aspect of our personal lives and the socio-cultural world in which we live. To sustain such "new" evangelization, every Christian person and community needs lifelong faith formation. The theological reasons could go on, but let us draw a little from the social sciences.

I've made the case that Christian faith invites those who embrace it to become Christian persons, to take on Christian identity. However, the social sciences are unanimous that identity is formed through relationships and community, by socialization (sociology) and enculturation

(anthropology). Indeed, we don't need any science to verify this basic insight; it is the common wisdom of life that every particular identity—personhood—is formed and sustained by the corresponding community. Becoming a Polish person requires the socialization and enculturation of a Polish community; becoming a Hispanic person requires a Hispanic community; thus, a Christian person requires a Christian community.

In a previous era, it was commonplace for particular faiths to be geographically located and confined; there they combined with their local cultures for a powerful marinade that could seep to the bone marrow of people. However, our postmodern world has invaded such lifestyle enclaves with diversity and multiple influences—often contrary to faith formation. So, what could be taken for granted in villages like my original Irish one—where one became Christian by osmosis—must now be crafted intentionally. This requires each Christian family, parish, program, or school to mold its milieu so as to socialize and enculturate people in Christian identity.

To conclude this section, I note the warrant offered by developmental psychology for TCC as an approach to lifelong faith formation. The research of James Fowler, et al., has amply demonstrated that the journey of faith may proceed through six recognizable stages of development. I say *may* proceed because people do not inevitably make progress in their lives of faith. In fact, the research suggests that most become "arrested" at a Stage 3 conventional faith. Perhaps in a less complex world and more uniform society, a conventional faith was sufficient for facing the vagaries of life. Now, however, the counter forces of post modernity make it less likely that a Stage 3 faith will survive the challenges of adulthood. As a result, many people abandon their faith because it truly is inadequate to their lives in the world. These postmodern times make more exigent that people continue to "develop" in their faith, as in so many other aspects of their lives. TCC can provide the needed lifelong faith formation along the way.

The Key Features of TCC

The defining feature of TCC is that it shifts catechesis beyond the schooling paradigm (without leaving its assets behind) to a community-centered approach. Within this paradigm shift, there are many sub-shifts: beyond didaction to conversation; beyond information to formation; beyond religious knowledge to spiritual wisdom; beyond children to

all people; beyond teachers and taught to communities sharing faith together.

This paradigm shift requires strategies and programs to implement it but its fundamental *modus operandi* is that every Christian person, family, and community take on a catechetical consciousness. By this I mean becoming aware that every aspect of our lives, personally and communally, can be and should be engaged to educate in Christian faith. For the person, instead of seeing catechesis as a ministry that *some* Christians do (the parochial or Sunday school teachers), all must embrace it as the mandate of baptism. Instead of the parish limiting catechesis to its ministry of the word, it must recognize the educational potential of all its ministries, and heighten their catechetical effect. Instead of the family seeing itself as ancillary to the catechetical educators of a parish program or school, parents must reverse this equation and embrace their responsibilities as “the first and foremost religious educators of their children” (Vatican II, *Decree on Education* #3). And parish programs and parochial schools must attend to their implicit catechetical curriculum as well as their explicit one, i.e., must harness every aspect to promote lifelong faith formation.

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One schematic way to imagine implementing this approach is for the parish, family, and school or program to participate in all the ministries of the church—each in its own way—and with a catechetical consciousness. Since the earliest Christian communities, the church has described its core ministries as: *koinonia*, demanding that it be a community of living *witness* to Christian faith; *leitourgia*, requiring the community to *worship* God together; *diakonia*, mandating care for people’s

physical and spiritual *welfare*; and *kerygma* that requires evangelizing, preaching, and teaching God’s *word* of revelation that comes through Scripture and tradition. So, we can summarize the church’s core ministries as *witness*, *worship*, *word*, and *welfare*. Let’s imagine every family, parish, and school/program as fulfilling each of the four, and doing so with a catechetical consciousness.

Family

The family should function like “a domestic church” (Vatican II, *Constitution on the Church* #11). Thus, it should carry on all the church’s ministries—in its own way. So, it can reflect on God’s *word* at intentional times of sharing faith (e.g., talking about the Sunday readings or homily). Beyond this, however, through the conversation of the home, and especially as life’s great questions and issues emerge, the family must carry on its ministry of the word at all “teachable moments,” occasional or prompted. Likewise, the family must reflect a life of *witness* to Christian faith, nurturing each other in its values and virtue. And every family should have its home *liturgy*, with its own religious rituals, symbols, and prayer patterns (before and after meals, morning and bedtime, etc.). Then, to catechize well, the family must practice the works of compassion and justice, both inward and outward.

Parish

The parish must give all its members “easy access” to God’s *word* through Scripture and tradition (Vatican II, *Constitution on the Liturgy* #22) by its preaching and formal programs of catechetical education. Beyond this, however, the parish needs to be a *witnessing* community of Christian faith, hope, and love if it is to catechize effectively. It must review every aspect of its liturgy for what it teaches; nothing that a parish does is more catechetical than how it *worships*. And its ministry of *welfare* must carry on the works of compassion and justice in ways that educate in faith. As a parish reaches out to the poor and marginalized, as it participates in the social struggles for justice and peace, it is most likely to effect lifelong faith formation.

Formal Programs

While every family and the life of the parish should practice the principles of TCC, there must also be formal programs of reflective education in faith (more below) that stretch across the life-cycle and lend ample opportunities for both age specific and intergenerational catechesis. The formal programs

(basal catechesis for grade and high school students, youth and young adult ministries, RCIA and Bible study, etc.) should engage people as active participants in reflective catechetical education. While these programs should not depend upon the liturgy and lectionary for their scope and sequence, there should be a deep resonance and partnership between the liturgical and catechetical ministries of a parish. However, I add that formal catechesis must be in partnership with all the parish ministries—not just liturgy. And the formal programs themselves should give people opportunities to practice their faith through works of compassion and justice, to reflect the values and virtues of Christian community throughout their ethos, and offer opportunities for shared prayer and worship.

School

The same can be said of a Catholic school. Its catechetical curriculum is its explicit education in faith, but the implicit curriculum of the school also pertains to its catechetical effectiveness. Without trying to replicate a parish, the school must promote genuine Christian community, have its own liturgical life and spiritual opportunities (retreats, etc.), and encourage the works of compassion and justice, both within the school and in its social context.

Curriculum and Settings

In a summary way, the curriculum and settings of TCC is the shared life of the parish, the family, and the program/school. As these settings work in coalition, each intentionally carrying on, in its own way, the ministries of word, witness, worship, and welfare, their life in faith together *is* the catechetical curriculum. And beyond the socialization of Christian identity, the teaching/learning process of TCC can be best named as “conversation,” of sharing faith together.

This being said, every parish needs its formal programs of catechesis and its designated catechetical leaders. Many may be familiar with Generations of Faith² with its monthly extended meetings of shared food, prayer and ritual, its intergenerational and age specific curricula, its take home resources for family follow-up, and its strong correlation with the liturgical seasons and lectionary. This is an imaginative way to organize the programmatic of TCC and many parishes are finding this model or some adaptation of it to be effective.

I’m convinced, however, that the principles of TCC transcend the programmatic and must be honored throughout and beyond any particular

program. So, every parish and especially its designated ministers must develop a catechetical consciousness about its shared life and ministries. Likewise, all parents must be proactive and intentional in their role as the primary religious educators of their children. Far beyond “dropping them off” at some parish program or school, parents must constantly attend to the ethos of their family for Christian values, enact their home rituals and prayers, model and encourage the works of compassion and justice, and take every opportunity to share their faith with their children. Likewise, parish or school programs of catechesis must reach far beyond—without leaving behind—instruction in the faith of children, and become programs of lifelong faith formation, information, and transformation.

When designing the formal catechetical curriculum, a parish, family, and program or school must commit to teach the whole story and vision of Christian faith. By this I mean that it should teach the constitutive truths, worship, and ethics of Christian faith and what it means for and asks of our lives. Further, every curriculum should reflect a scope and sequence that is age appropriate—suited to participants from preschool to the golden years. This is best achieved by what Jerome Bruner called a spiral curriculum; in other words, one that ever teaches the core themes of Christian faith in language understandable to every age group, and yet ever deepening and expanding as the years go by. Though the basal curriculum cannot be determined by the liturgical season and lectionary—because these cannot teach the whole story and vision of Christian faith and in age appropriate ways—every catechetical curriculum should echo and correlate with the liturgy. Further, a lectionary-based curriculum can certainly be ancillary to the basal one.

I said at the outset that lifelong formation in Christian faith requires both intentional socialization and *reflective education*. TCC certainly encourages intentional socialization in Christian identity; however, this alone is not likely to sponsor people beyond a conventional faith. A socialized faith alone would tend to limit a person’s horizons to “the village.” Beyond intentional socialization, TCC must also provide a critically discerning and consciousness-raising pedagogy that is likely to bring people to religious literacy and a thorough understanding of Christian faith, to be personally convinced of its constitutive teachings, to appropriate its spiritual wisdom as their own, and to be informed, formed, and continually transformed to integrate their faith with their daily lives. So, in addition to intentional socialization, TCC must

include reflective catechetical education as well. As I said above, “it takes a village with a school”—of some kind.

Teaching-Learning Process

For many years I’ve been attempting to articulate such a pedagogy. I have called it a “shared Christian praxis approach,” though its dynamics can be more patently described as “bringing life to faith and faith to life.” Its constitutive components are a community of conversation and active participation in which people reflect together with discernment on their own life in the world and on their socio-cultural realities, have access together to the spiritual wisdom of Christian story and vision, and are encouraged to personally integrate these sources—life and faith—as lived Christian faith toward God’s reign. And though I write about it as Christian—reflecting my own faith community—it can well be enacted as a shared Jewish or Muslim or Buddhist or Hindu or world religions praxis approach as well.

Many influences have encouraged me in such an approach, not least of which was the pedagogy of Jesus throughout the gospels. Note that the *General Directory for Catechesis* urges religious educators to imitate “the pedagogy of Christ” (#140), taking Jesus as “the convincing model for all communication of the faith” (#137). We can observe Jesus’ pedagogy at work throughout his public ministry but especially in his use of parables. There he begins by prompting people to look at and reflect upon the ordinary and everyday of their lives; he uses this “present praxis” as an entrée to teach his gospel message “with authority” (see Mk. 1:22); then he invites them to take the good news into their lives and to follow as disciples. In no instance is this pedagogy more demonstrated than in the story of the stranger and the two disciples on the road to Emmaus (see Lk. 24:13–35). Note how the Risen Christ walks along with them and engages their lives, invites them to tell and reflect upon “all that had happened,” reminds them again of the story and vision of their faith, waits for them to see for themselves, whereupon they choose to return to Jerusalem to live discipleship in the midst of the community. I elaborate such a shared Christian praxis approach as a focusing activity and five “movements.”

Focusing Activity

Here the educator’s intent is twofold: 1) to engage people as active participants in the teaching-learning event, and 2) to get participants to focus on a

curriculum topic that is of real interest to their lives and/or faith.

Movement One: Expressing the Theme as in Present Praxis

The educator encourages participants to express themselves around the generative theme, symbol, or text as reflected in their present praxis. They can express what they do or see others doing, their own feelings or thoughts or interpretations, or their perception of what is going on around them in their socio-cultural context. Their expressions here can be mediated through any means of communication.

Movement Two: Reflecting on the Theme of Life/Faith

The intent here is to encourage participants to reflect critically—discerningly—on what they expressed in movement one. Critical reflection can engage reason, memory, imagination or a combination of them; such reflection can be both personal and socio-cultural.

Movement Three: Accessing Christian Story and Vision

Here the pedagogical task is to teach clearly the Christian story and vision around the particular theme, symbol, or text, and to do so with integrity and persuasion. The key is that people have ready access to the spiritual wisdom of Christian faith around the theme and to what it might mean for their lives—both story and vision.

Movement Four: Appropriating the Wisdom of Christian Faith

This begins the dynamic of moving back to life again with renewed Christian commitment (movement five). Here the pedagogy encourages people to come to see for themselves what the wisdom of Christian faith might mean for their everyday lives, to personally appropriate this wisdom and to “take it to heart” in who they are and how they live.

Movement Five: Making Decisions for Christian Faith

Here participants are invited to choose how to respond to the spiritual wisdom of Christian faith. Decisions can be cognitive, affective, or behavioral—what people believe, how they might relate with God or others, or the ethics and values by which to live their lives.

Though I outline these movements sequentially, they have great flexibility and many possible combinations. More important by far than the movements, however, are their under girding commitments. The focusing act reflects commitment to *actively engage* participants in the teaching/learning dynamic and with something *generative* for their lives. Movement one invites people to *pay attention* to their own lives in the world and to *express* their present praxis. Movement two reflects commitment to *critical (discerning) reflection*, encouraging people to think for themselves, personally and socially, to question and probe, to reason, remember and imagine around the life/faith theme, symbol or text. The commitment in movement three is to give people ready *access* to faith story and vision, and with persuasion, enabling participants to encounter spiritual wisdom for their lives. Movement four reflects commitment to *appropriation*, to encouraging participants to *integrate* their lives and faith tradition, to make its spiritual wisdom their own. And movement five invites people to *decision*, choosing a response to the spiritual wisdom they have encountered.

The Primary Agents of TCC

The communal, conversational and participative nature of TCC makes for a very egalitarian approach in which all Christians are responsible to participate according to their teaching/learning style. I reiterate: catechetics is the responsibility of the whole church. However, and like every function of ministry, it also needs its designated ministers to organize, resource, and facilitate it—to maintain its holy order. Beginning with the pastor, the whole parish staff must see their particular and their combined ministries as responsible for TCC. All parish ministers should have a catechetical consciousness that enables them to maximize the faith education opportunities of their particular ministry. So, the pastor can see to it that parish council meetings begin with a reading of the Sunday gospel and a ten-minute conversation by participants around the word of God they heard for their lives.

Then, the parish liturgist is a crucial agent of TCC. Of course, the primary function of liturgy is to worship God; to use liturgy to catechize in a didactic way is an abuse of liturgy. On the other hand, precisely because it is so symbol-laden, the liturgy, as Vatican II declared, contains “abundant instruction for the faithful” (*Liturgy Constitution* #33). The liturgist must see to it that the liturgical symbols and rites are enacted in ways that nurture people in lived, living, and life-giving faith. Likewise, the

music minister must be catechetically alert; what a Christian community sings goes to the hearts of its members. And so on for every parish minister; all must play their part in TCC.

Then, the ideal is that every parish have its own designated catechetical leader who has the theological and pedagogical formation for their specific ministry. This “director” (by whatever title) needs to recruit a whole cadre of volunteer catechists and see to it that they are well trained and sustained for their ministry. Given that TCC engages the whole community, such volunteers need more competence than ever, both theological and pedagogical, especially for their work with adults.

Such competence is a tall order for any parish, and especially for smaller ones with limited resources; yet, all must try to approximate the ideal. It is also true that smaller parishes have significant advantages over larger ones; for example, they likely already have a stronger sense of community—the very foundation of TCC. And we should always remember the ancient conviction that every Christian community has the charisms needed to carry on the full ministries of the church. TCC should be possible in every parish.

TCC at Work

I leave descriptions of parish-based programs to people directly involved in them. This being said, I favor multiple and varied models to implement the principles of TCC and repeat that fulfilling its principles is broader than any particular program. So, the once a month extended meeting that engages all participants in age specific and intergenerational catechesis is certainly one potential model. However, there could be many other formats, for example: a unified and parish-wide curriculum followed by different groups (children, youth, young adult, parents, grandparents, non-married adults), each in their own context and at their own pace; or some intense meetings of the whole parish in early Fall and Spring, with age specific meetings in between, and parents being the primary catechists in the home; or the more traditional parish programs (basal grade and high school, RCIA and faith sharing, youth and young adults, etc.), all meeting in their disparate groups but honoring the principles of TCC and meeting a few times a year in parish-wide gatherings.

Instead of pontificating on how such programs should be organized, here I will say something of what my spouse and I try to do intentionally in our roles as the primary religious educators of our son, Ted (age seven on January 4, 2008). I hasten to add

that this is more of a sample than an *example*—the latter would be to over claim for our efforts. After a late start in parenting, we try to be intentional in sharing our faith with Teddy and in nurturing his Catholic Christian identity.

Much of what follows will sound obvious but perhaps this makes a point. The problem is that when parents are told “you are the primary religious educators of your children” (Vatican II), they can hear “educator” as calling them to a schooling paradigm, as if we should sit our children down at desks, with textbooks and chalkboard, and give them didactic instruction. Some parents do home-school their children, but this is not what the church has in mind. The *General Directory for Catechesis* puts the priority on the ethos of the home. Rather than formal didaction, family catechesis is “a Christian education more witnessed to than taught, more occasional than systematic, more ongoing than structured into periods” (#255). I will follow the categories of ministry I’ve outlined above (witness, worship, word, and welfare); without being exhaustive, I indicate a few deliberate efforts we make under each heading.

By way of *witness*, Ted’s coming home to us has forced us to “clean up our act” in innumerable ways. Not that we do it perfectly now, God knows, but we do try to model the virtues and values that are core to Christian faith and to avoid the vices that are antithetical. This amounts to trying to live together as a small community of faith, hope, and love. We have found some decent and age appropriate religious art for his bedroom and for other parts of the house. We are active in our local parish, go to Mass as a family at least every Sunday, and we try to make this a happy family outing (e.g., hot chocolate afterward).

As *worship* we have developed a number of family rituals and prayer patterns. Since he was only a few days old, we’ve taken Ted to the window each morning, looked out, and said together, “Thank you Holy God for a good night’s sleep and a brand new day.” Now he does this himself every morning, bidden or not. On the way to school, we often play the game of looking in the passing scene for “one special thing to thank God for.” We do the usual grace before meals and the traditional Our Father (we often add Mother as well) and Hail Mary prayers. At bedtime, we are now into a practice that Ted seems to love; we ask him to remember three things that gave him joy and for which to thank God, and then three blessings to ask for.

As *word*, we try to take every opportunity, and especially when Ted asks the great questions (like “what happened to granny when she died?”), to share our faith with him. Indeed, not a day goes by

that we don’t have the occasion for some “God-talk” with Ted. And when he asks for a story at night time, I have a little leprechaun character (Finbar McGonigle) who loves to tell Bible stories; Finbar is so old that he remembers Jesus well and can fill in lots of “details” that the authors left out (like the name of the donkey that Jesus rode into Jerusalem). Another deliberateness around *the word* is our efforts to make the conversation and language patterns of our home those of respect and inclusion, never demeaning anyone but speaking respectfully of all people.

Some of our family efforts at *welfare* are having Ted sort out the clothes and toys he has outgrown to pass them on to poorer children. We try to recycle and to reuse as much as possible and to explain why we do; he is now very conscientious about the environment (wonderful how this appeals to little kids). We encourage him never to waste food and I do what my mother did: remind him of all the poor and hungry children in the world (I’m sure there’s a better way but it worked on me). And Ted and I have recently begun to go occasionally on Sunday afternoons to a local Catholic Worker soup kitchen to help with brunch; he loves it and the guests love to see him come.

I’m sure many readers will have far better suggestions. My point is only that every family must devise its own preferred ways of being intentional about Christian witness, worship, word and welfare.

The Possibilities and Challenges of TCC

As already indicated, TCC invites every Christian person and parish, base community and family to a whole new consciousness about their vital function in the church’s catechetical mission, and asks that they be deliberate—proactive—in fulfilling it. Regardless of how TCC may be programmed, every Christian must honor its basic principles:

- that the ordinary and everyday relationships of life offer us constant opportunities to share our faith, and
- without imposing or disrespecting the faith of others, we must take advantage of those opportunities.

As we do so, we not only share our faith with others; we deepen our own as well. I have often begun a workshop with catechists by asking, “how many of you would say that your faith has been deepened by your efforts to share it?” Invariably, every hand in the place goes up. The gospel promise of a “one hundred fold” return is certainly true about

sharing our faith with others. And once people form the habit of sharing faith, this is likely to continue, nurturing their own lifelong faith formation.

The greatest challenge for TCC and lifelong faith formation is the complacency we have encouraged in people about evangelizing and catechizing; the church itself has encouraged its rank-and-file to think that somebody else (priests, sisters, DREs, catechists, or whoever) will do this for them, in their stead. Now TCC truly represents a paradigm shift in consciousness and practice. Such shifts do not come easily and old ways die hard. That we have made so much progress over the relatively short life of this movement should give hope and renew our best efforts.

Beyond a profound shift in consciousness, TCC asks local parishes for some real investments in personnel and resources. Here I have particular concern about the diminishing number of priests and the consequent closing of parishes. Also ominous is the depletion of financial resources that deter hiring the kind of trained parish (and school) staff needed to implement and sustain such a program as TCC over the long haul. This is one reason why we need to put even greater stress on the role of the family, investing all the more in mentoring, training, networking, and resourcing families to fulfill their crucial function.

The challenges notwithstanding, TCC is a feasible approach to lifelong faith formation.

Endnotes

¹ I will often use this phrase to encourage commitment to the values of both catechesis and religious education; our catechesis for faith identity should reflect good religious education, and our Christian religious education should nurture people in faith.

² For more information about Generations of Faith go to www.generationsoffaith.org.

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