

Catechesis in Youth Ministry

The Pathway to Discipleship

by Bob Rice, PhD.

When I first got involved in youth ministry, some twenty-ish years ago, there was a tension between youth ministry and catechesis. Youth ministry was stereotyped as fun, games, and pizza, whereas catechesis was education, memorization, and... boredom. Telling a youth minister he or she had to catechize felt like telling a ballerina she had to wear boots.

Thankfully, a lot has changed since then, in no small part to the oft quoted phrase of St. John Paul II: “The definitive aim of catechesis is to put people, not only in touch with, but in communion, in intimacy with Jesus Christ.”¹ Authentic catechesis is not only about information, but intimacy. It seeks to do more than just educate. Catechesis is a movement of evangelization.

This context is essential, because catechesis fails when it is not connected to a vibrant proclamation of the Gospel Message, just as a branch dies when not connected to the vine. As envisioned by the Church, catechesis should not be about *something* but *someone*. It is always focused on Jesus, his merciful love, how He revealed the fulness of God, and how we are invited to life in the Trinity. “The whole concern of doctrine and its teaching is the love that never ends.”² The response of one who was educated is, “I didn’t know that about God.” The response of one who is catechized should be, “I didn’t know God loved me that much.”

However, this love is not just “warm fuzzies”. Catechesis deals with some hard truths, and therein lies some of its greatest challenges. It is easy to accept Jesus as Savior, but Jesus as Lord? That is the difficult part. It can be tempting to side-step the more challenging parts of the Gospel. But catechesis is not to be confused with customer satisfaction. It is about salvation. Carrying the cross is as challenging now as it was two-thousand years ago.

In the parable of the sower,³ the majority of those who hear the word welcome it with joy, but only a small portion fully receive it. As people learn more about what it means to follow Christ, many walk away for a variety of reasons. However, those who remain bear fruit in abundance.

The name the Church uses for that last group are “disciples”, and it is the first goal of youth ministry to, “empower young people to be disciples of Jesus Christ in our world today.”⁴ The recently published *Directory for Catechesis* states, “Catechesis... forms believers for mission, accompanying them in the maturation of attitudes of faith and making them aware that they are *missionary disciples*, called to participate actively in the proclamation of the Gospel and to make the Kingdom of God present in the world.”⁵

¹ John Paul II, *Catechesi Tradendae*, no. 5.

² *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 25.

³ Cf. Mark 4:1-9.

⁴ United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Renewing the Vision*, pg. 9.

⁵ Pontifical Council for the Promotion of the New Evangelization, *Directory for Catechesis*, no. 50.

Catechesis is the ministry that leads young people from infatuation to intimacy, from being a spectator to being a disciple. It is one of the most challenging things we do with young people, but also one of the most important. Young people have a right to know everything that God has revealed. We who proclaim those truths must do so with courage and creativity, confident in the power of the Holy Spirit the promise of Jesus: “If you remain in my word, you will truly be my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.”⁶

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Catechesis at the Core of Discipleship in Youth Ministry

by Rob Tessier

What is Catechesis?

“In the early Church there was no difference between catechesis and discipleship”. ~ Pope St. John Paul II

Catechesis at its core means “to echo”. Discipleship of young people is a way of helping them come to know and reflect He who loved them into creation. “At the heart of catechesis we find, in essence, a Person, the Person of Jesus... the definitive aim of catechesis is to put people not only in touch but in communion, in intimacy, with Jesus Christ.” (CT 5) Pope St. John Paul II further explains in *Catechesis Tradendae* that “catechesis is intimately bound up with the whole of the Church's life... her inner growth and correspondence with God's plan depend essentially on catechesis.” (CT 13)

As Directors of Youth Ministry, we embrace catechesis at the core of discipleship in fulfilling the great commission of Jesus to “go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations... teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.” (Mt 28: 19-20) DYMs and their volunteers accompany young people on a journey of both heart and mind. It is our aim to apprentice youth to know the Person of Christ in such an intimate way that faith can take root, grow, be nurtured, and blossom.

Intentional discipleship, first modeled by Jesus, involves catechesis of accompaniment and dialogue in which there is an interplay of revelation then response or a *fides quae fides qua*. Consider the road to Emmaus as Jesus unraveled the scriptures to his followers in such a way that their hearts were burning. (Lk 24: 32) In our own process of catechetical conversation, we can learn from Jesus who allowed his disciples to first listen to God's word, then carefully reflect upon it, consider it, and act!

⁶ John 8:31-32, NABRE.

If our catechesis is to be successful, it must be Christocentric. Christ must be central to every aspect of our ministry to youth. Let us strive to echo the Divine Teacher to those we accompany as we “present Christ and everything in relation to Him.” (GDC 98)

How do we do it?

“If we only accompany but do not convert, then we simply walk beside people farther into the night, away from the community of faith in Jerusalem. If we only question and listen, then we withhold from people the saving news of salvation.” ~ Cardinal Dolan

Catechesis requires DYMs to take an interest in those whom we serve as we walk with our young disciples into communion with Jesus. The Emmaus journey so perfectly demonstrates how Jesus met the disciples where they were at, listened, spoke, and at the right moment revealed Himself at a moment of receptivity that then caused them to act boldly. Consider a marriage proposal. When a man falls deeply in love with a woman to such a degree that she becomes the one he wishes to love and serve even to the point of death, he is ready to propose. In a way, we too propose the love of Jesus Christ to a young person when we share the kerygma, the centrality of who Jesus is and what he did for us.

Integrity to the deposit of faith, substantial use of sacred scripture, and deep integration with the sacramental life are essential components to effectively delivering catechesis to those we disciple. The USCCB provides a framework for a curriculum for high school students. The Christological centrality of this framework is designed to form the content of instruction as well as to be a vehicle for growth in a young person’s relationship with the Lord so that each may come to know and love Jesus in a personal way. The six themes are as follow:

1. The Revelation of Jesus in Scripture
2. Who is Jesus?
3. The Mission of Jesus Christ (Paschal Mystery)
4. Jesus Christ’s Mission Continues in the Church
5. Sacraments as Privileged Encounters with Jesus Christ
6. Life in Jesus Christ

The use of scripture in catechesis is paramount. “All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for refutation, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that one who belongs to God may be competent, equipped for every good work.” (2 Tim 3:16-17) Teens would be deprived to simply hear our own interpretations of the faith or a paraphrasing of scripture. As frequently as possible, we should directly read from the Bible to our students. “The ‘study of the sacred page’ should be the very soul of sacred theology.” (CCC #132) When using a Bible, treat the book and the pages with sincere reverence. Those who witness our use of the scripture should witness that we handle it differently, in a sacred way. Scripture needs to breath in the fullness of its context so our students can truly hear God’s message as He intended and come to know our Lord in a more intimate way.

The Liturgy is that place of maximum encounter with God. As DYMs, the formation of the faith needs to accompany the sacramental life. Our discipleship must ensure that all we do leads teens into a deeper participation in the sacramental life where they will truly experience the Person of Christ. Sofia Cavalletti says, “Jesus ‘seizes’ the person... and communicates divine life to each according to one’s need.” Liturgy and Sacraments “must be preceded by evangelization, faith, and conversion. It can then produce its fruits in the lives of the faithful: new life in the Spirit, involvement in the mission of the Church, and service to her unity.” (CCC# 1072)

What does catechesis look like?

“Modern man listens more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if he does listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses.” ~ Pope Paul VI

As a catechist, my first aim is to penetrate the disciple in such a way that knowledge of Christ is not enough, but there exists a sincere desire to really know Christ in the heart. Teens in our ministry should witness the Person of Christ in my very being. On a personal note, my faith formation occurred for eleven years through a weekly class at my parish, but my entrance on the road to being disciplined did not take place until the end of my junior year while attending a Workcamp with a priest who intentionally opened the faith to me in a way that was modeled by Jesus on the road to Emmaus.

When considering what catechesis will look like at an individual parish, let us remind ourselves that our net must be concerned with both those in our midst and those who do not show up. We must think creatively and with persistence develop opportunities to reach the lost sheep. We are called to be persistent and to never hesitate sharing the Truth in charity. Be encouraged by St. Paul who said, “Proclaim the word; be persistent whether it is convenient or inconvenient; convince, reprimand, encourage through all patience and teaching... be self-possessed in all circumstances; put up with hardship; perform the work of an evangelist; fulfill your ministry.” (2 Timothy 4:2-5)

What must I do to be an effective evangelizer?

“The thread of our discourse is affected by the very joy that we ourselves experience, and as a consequence is delivered more easily and more gratefully.” St. Augustine

As a DYM, how can I assist in the conversion of my students if I first have not experienced a deep conversion and maintained an active prayer life that frequents the sacraments? To be an effective teacher, I must first and always be a disciple. Jesus desires to continually grow within us and reveal Himself more each day. This incarnational daily experience with Jesus Christ naturally produces great joy that becomes attractive to others, because it is a true and genuine expression of Love that produces the joy. St. John the Baptist offers incredible insight when he reflects “this joy of mine has been made complete. He must increase; I must decrease.” (John 3: 30) The more we, as DYMs, get out of the way and allow Jesus to be central, the more effective our catechesis will be.

When considering how to become a more effective evangelizer, St. Paul says “for I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.” (1 Cor 2:2) Christ must be at the center of who we are and what we teach and how we teach it! Every lesson or activity should beg the question: “How does this relate to Jesus Christ?” In joy we must be eager to share the kerygma always. As DYMs, we must possess an active sacramental life, be praying every day, dialoguing with Jesus consistently, and striving to live our vocations in holiness.

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clowns. A calling to ministry within the Church led Rob back home to full time Youth Ministry and a deeper participation into the Youth Apostles Institute based out of McLean, VA. Married shortly thereafter, Rob and Carole now have 9 children between the ages of 6 - 21, live on a small farm, and perform as the Tessier Family Singers to area nursing homes.