

204. Introduction

In this NCD the term catechist is used in a broad sense to designate anyone who participates formally or informally in catechetical ministry. All members of a community of believers are called to share in this ministry by being witnesses to the faith. Some, however, are called to more specific catechetical roles. Parents, teachers, and principals in Catholic schools, parish catechists, coordinators or directors of religious education, those who work in diocesan and national catechetical offices, deacons, priests, and bishops — all are catechists with distinct roles. Here we shall describe ideal qualities, for which all catechists should strive, and discuss the various roles and the educational preparation required for them.



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PART A: IDEAL QUALITIES OF CATECHISTS

205. *An ideal and a challenge*

Because it points to an ideal, what follows is meant to be a challenge as well as a guide. This ideal should not discourage present or prospective catechists. On the contrary, as they participate in the catechetical ministry their religious lives will be intensified and they will find themselves growing in the qualities needed for successful ministry to others. It is these human and Christian qualities of catechists, more than their methods and tools, upon which the success of catechesis depends.

206. *Response to a call*

As important as it is that a catechist have a clear understanding of the teaching of Christ and His Church, this is not enough. He or she must also receive and respond to a ministerial call, which comes from the Lord and is articulated in the local Church by the bishop. The response to this call includes willingness to give time and talent, not only to catechizing others, but to one's own continued growth in faith and understanding.

207. *Witness to the gospel*

For catechesis to be effective, the catechist must be fully committed to Jesus Christ. Faith must be shared with conviction, joy, love, enthusiasm, and hope. "The summit and center of catechetical formation lies in an aptitude and ability to communicate the Gospel message."¹ This is possible only when the catechist believes in the gospel and its power to transform lives. To give witness to the gospel, the catechist must establish a living, ever-deepening relationship with the Lord. He or she must be a person of prayer, one who frequently reflects on the scriptures and whose Christlike living testifies to deep faith. Only men and women of faith can share faith with others, preparing the setting within which people can respond in faith to God's grace.

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208. *Commitment to the Church*

One who exercises the ministry of the word represents the Church, to which the word has been entrusted. The catechist believes in the Church and is aware that, as a pilgrim people, it is in constant need of renewal. Committed to this visible community, the catechist strives to be an instrument of the Lord's power and a sign of the Spirit's presence.

The catechist realizes that it is Christ's message which he or she is called to proclaim. To insure fidelity to that message, catechists test and validate their

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understanding and insights in the light of the gospel message as presented by the teaching authority of the Church.

209. Sharer in community

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The catechist is called to foster community as one who has "learned the meaning of community by experiencing it."² Community is formed in many ways. Beginning with acceptance of individual strengths and weaknesses, it progresses to relationships based on shared goals and values. It grows through discussion, recreation, cooperation on projects, and the like.

Yet it does not always grow easily; patience and skill are frequently required. Even conflict, if creatively handled, can be growth-producing, and Christian reconciliation is an effective means of fostering community. Many people have had little experience of parish community and must be gradually prepared for it.

Christian community is fostered especially by the Eucharist, "which is at once sign of community and cause of its growth."³ The catechist needs to experience this unity through frequent participation in the celebration of the Eucharist with other catechists and with those being catechized. Awareness of membership in a Christian community leads to awareness of the many other communities in the world which stand in need of service. The catechist seeks to cooperate with other parish leaders in making the parish a focal point of community in the Church.

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210. Servant of the community

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Authentic experience of Christian community leads one to the service of others. The catechist is committed to serving the Christian community, particularly in the parish, and the community-at-large. Such service means not only responding to needs when asked, but taking the initiative in seeking out the needs of individuals and communities, and encouraging students to do the same.

Sensitive to the community's efforts to find solutions to "a host of complex problems such as war, poverty, racism, and environmental pollution, which undermine community within and among nations,"⁴ the catechist educates to peace and justice, and supports social action when appropriate. The Church often becomes involved in efforts to solve global problems through missionaries, who also carry out in a special way its mission of universal evangelization. The catechist should show how support for missionary endeavors is not only required by the Church's missionary nature but is an expression of solidarity within the human community.

c.VII

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211. *Knowledge, skills, and abilities*

Although even the best preparation for catechetical ministry will have little effect without the action of the Holy Spirit in the hearts of catechists and those being catechized, catechists should certainly seek to acquire the knowledge, skills, and abilities needed to communicate the gospel message effectively. They must have a solid grasp of Catholic doctrine and worship; familiarity with scripture; communication skills; the ability to use various methodologies; understanding of how people grow and mature and of how persons of different ages and circumstances learn.

PART B: CATECHETICAL ROLES AND PREPARATION

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212. *Parents as catechists*

Parents are the first and foremost catechists of their children.⁵ They catechize informally but powerfully by example and instruction. They communicate values and attitudes by showing love for Christ and His Church and for each other, by reverently receiving the Eucharist and living in its spirit, and by fostering justice and love in all their relationships. Their active involvement in the parish, their readiness to seek opportunities to serve others, and their practice of frequent and spontaneous prayer, all make meaningful their professions of belief. Parents nurture faith in their children by showing them the richness and beauty of lived faith. Parents should frequently be reminded of their obligation to see to it that their children participate in catechetical programs sponsored by the Church.

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When children are baptized the Church community promises to help parents foster their faith. It keeps this promise, first of all, by its own witness as a worshiping, believing, serving community; and also by providing formal catechesis for adults, youth, and children. Adult catechesis, which deepens the faith of parents, helps them nurture faith in their children.

The Church community also keeps its promise to parents by providing programs intended specifically to help them in their catechetical role. Such programs focus on the task of parents in relation to particular moments or issues in the child's religious life, such as sacramental preparation and moral development. They also seek to familiarize parents with the stages in children's growth and the relevance these have for catechesis.

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When formally participating in the catechesis of their children, parents must be mindful of the pre-eminent right of the Church to specify the content of authentic catechesis. They always have an obligation to catechize according to the teaching authority of the Church.⁶

Parish and diocesan personnel should collaborate in planning and presenting programs for parents, including the parents of handicapped children. Parents themselves should have a direct role in planning such programs.

213. *Parish catechists*

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Parish catechists, many of whom are volunteers, may be engaged in catechizing adults, young people, children, or those with special needs. Theirs is a particular way of carrying out the promise which the Church makes at every Baptism: to support, pray for, and instruct the baptized and foster their growth in faith.

The fundamental tasks of catechists are to proclaim Christ's message, to participate in efforts to develop community, to lead people to worship and prayer, and to motivate them to serve others. To accomplish all this, catechists

must identify and create "suitable conditions which are necessary for the Christian message to be sought, accepted, and more profoundly investigated."⁷ They recognize, however, that faith is a gift and that it is not ultimately their efforts but the interaction of God's grace and human freedom which lead people to accept faith and respond to it.

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Parish and diocesan personnel and others involved in catechetical ministry should help catechists develop the qualities outlined here. Because catechists approach their task with varying degrees of competence, programs should be designed to help individuals acquire the particular knowledge and skills they need. Catechists typically participate in a variety of teaching and learning programs, liturgical experiences, classes, retreats, service programs, study clubs, and similar activities. They carry on their ministry in parish catechetical programs, Catholic schools, and other settings. Their training should equip them to make effective use of the resources available for catechesis and to adapt materials to the age, capacity, and culture of those they seek to reach.

Men and women from all walks of life volunteer for parish catechetical programs. Parish and diocesan programs for the preparation and in-service training of volunteers should include the following elements.

1. Basic orientation and preparation, including instruction in theology, scripture, psychology, and catechetical techniques. They should be shown how to identify goals and achieve them in their particular circumstances.

2. Opportunities for liturgical celebrations, prayer, retreats, and other experiences of Christian community with others engaged in this ministry.

3. Continuing in-service educational opportunities.

4. Regular assistance, from more experienced persons, in planning and evaluating their performance.

5. Opportunities to evaluate not only their performance but the programs in which they are involved.

6. More specialized training for those who will work with physically or mentally handicapped persons.

7. Cultivation of a sense of community among the catechists during the entire formation process.

8. Some form of commissioning ceremony which expresses the faith community's call and the catechists' dedicated response.

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