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SERVING TODAY'S CATECHETICAL LEADERS


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Reclaiming the Evangelistic Moment in Our Catechesis

[Sound, Practical Advice](#)

By Eric Westby

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Eric Westby offers sound, practical advice for ways in which we can evangelize in our catechetical work.

I am not the only catechist who has prepared what I thought was the greatest catechetical session since the Sermon on the Mount, only to have it help the participants cure their most recent battles with insomnia. Over the years, as I have seen little impact from what I thought were well-planned sessions, it has forced me to look more closely at the process of conversion, specifically that which we do to prepare a person to hear the Good News. In *Catechesi Tradendae* 20, Pope John Paul II describes catechesis as a maturation of the process of evangelization. As a catechist, the better I assisted in the process of evangelization (the better I helped a person know, love and follow the Lord Jesus) the easier it became to catechize that person. In this article, I would like to offer practical ways we can evangelize in our catechetical endeavors, and in doing so, prepare the foundation for catechesis and lifelong conversion.

What People are Seeking

I begin this analysis of how to prepare people for catechesis by first examining what it is people are looking for when they come to our programs. Five desires I have seen in people as they have presented themselves for catechesis include:

1. To be acknowledged and to be connected

No person who comes to our parishes wants to be a number, they want to feel connected with people, with a parish family. This desire to be acknowledged and to be connected is an issue of anthropology, that as humans we have a God-given desire to be in community and relationship with others. Participants in our programs are looking for more than information, desiring to be known, loved and given a purpose in life. They want to be respected and treated with value. Those who come to our programs must think of us as their friends, as a fellow-Christians who will mentor them in what it means to follow Christ. In order to accomplish this connection, hospitality and welcoming are crucial elements in preparing for the environment for conversion. The more people perceive that we have 'rolled out the red carpet' for them, the easier they will be able to hear the message we will impart.

2. To be served and supported

As a result of our culture, or from wounds in life, those we serve often come to Church very fragile and confused. When they meet us, they want to know that we are here for them for the long-haul, not just when it is convenient. Our participants want to know that we will listen to them and take real concern for their daily problems and struggles. They want to know that we will help them to the best of our abilities and that they are worth the struggle. We can only show value to them through meaningful, quality time. We must not tire of holding people by the hand to support them on this journey. In order to do this, we need to listen to people and know their real needs.

3. To receive quality

Companies dealing with goods and services in our society are made or broken by the issue of quality. Quality in catechesis is in our service, rooted in the Church's double fidelity to God and to man. To have good quality catechesis does not mean that we need to throw millions of Euros/Dollars/Pounds into our program. The issue is about using the catechetical resources we receive to the best of our abilities, and not being lax about putting a good session together.

4. To know that what they are undertaking is attainable and reasonable

The reasons people enter into our catechetical programs are as varied as the number of people we serve. Especially when dealing with tragedy, or their own personal sin, or difficult marriage situations, they want to know that, by grace, they can do what is asked

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of them and that it will be worth it. They must be convinced that it is possible to be a saint (in training), that it is possible to have a marriage blessed by the Church, that it is possible to unite their sufferings with the sufferings of Christ, and that it is possible to live a life of sexual purity and freedom from sin. In our very lives we have to be witnesses of the work of grace and joy of the Gospel.

5. To know that what they receive will make their lives better

In our world, every person asks "what is in it for me? What do I get from it?" - Following Christ will be difficult, and sacrifices will be required, but it will always be worth it. Any other 'path of life' will leave us with a lower quality of life. We must show those we catechize that living the Gospel is always worth it. Testimonies will be essential to make the Gospel come alive. No teaching alone will be able to stir the hearts of those we form. Only living witness, be it of the Saints or those saints in the making, will inspire great courage in the midst of difficult situations. We have to connect every catechetical teaching with the daily lives of those in our programs, showing how following Christ always improves our quality of life.

Shepherding Principles

To reclaim the evangelistic moment in our catechesis, I would like to propose the following evangelistic principles be part of our daily catechetical programs:

Seek the Sheep

Every possible effort needs to be made to seek out the lost sheep to bring them into the fold, beginning with those at our catechetical meetings! This is perhaps the most difficult and most crucial step in our catechesis, for we know that the living witness of the community will be the first element an inquirer, catechumen, or fully-initiated Catholic seeking instruction will look for to make sure our message is real. Some ways to seek out the lost sheep at our sessions include:

- **Know the names of every person and parent involved in your program.** This requires breaking out of our comfort zones, especially if you are an introvert. Know at least one thing about their family, occupation, recreation, and ask them about it every time you see them. Be able to have a discussion on topics that are not directly church-related.
- **Do the best publicity possible.** Use technology, including Web, audio record presentations. With the rise of computers has come the ability to get our message out in a more professional and attractive manner. Being able to use technology has become an essential component of twenty-first century catechesis.
- **Whenever possible, communicate directly and in a timely fashion with people.**

In an age of instant communication, people want direct communication from the leaders in a timely fashion. When we fail to communicate promptly, it appears to others that they are not important. Timely communication says to people that we are accessible to them and that they are important.

Feed the Sheep

At all events, have food. The food we present to our guests reflects what we think about them. We all know what it is like to walk into someone's home and be treated like royalty. Every time I visit Professor Bob Rice's home, I feast on the best cheeseburgers and libations Steubenville has to offer and I feel welcomed in the process. If people perceive we are taking care of their physical needs, they will begin to trust us. If they like the environment, they will trust us. Do your coffee urns have copious amounts of calcium deposits in them? If so, destroy them immediately.

Love the Sheep

Be able to accept people wherever they are at in life. Those who come to our programs want to know we love them for who they are. We need to realize that, if we are to be Christ to them, then we must be the forgiving Father ready to welcome his prodigal son back into the family. Woe to us if we fail in this regard! Many who come to our catechetical programs have experienced serious sin, guilt and suffering. We must help them see our programs as a place of reconciliation, not places of condemnation. We can make this happen:

- **With the use of humor.** Laughter disarms people and gets them off the defensive. It helps, too, if we laugh at ourselves, if we do not take ourselves too seriously. Self-deprecating humor helps others see that we, too, are on the road to conversion and that we do not need to be the center of attention.
- **By being flexible with people and their schedules.** People in today's world are on the go, more than any other in our world's history. We must acknowledge this and work with them. In my parish RCIA process, I audio record every presentation. When a person misses a session, I ask them to listen to it and give me their notes on the talk. The Lord

Caroline Farey

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is patient with us and we must be patient with others.

- **By not reacting negatively when people share their sins and mistakes with us.**

I have had countless conversations with teens and adults in which they have confided in me regarding their past sins and mistakes. During those moments, I always remind myself that I am in no position to judge them, but rather Christ calls me to help them reconcile with Him. During these conversations, we both know that their sin is bad, but I am always aware that it is not my place to add to their guilt. I constantly challenge myself to empathize first. We have constantly to remind our participants that we are glad to see them and that we are privileged to serve them before we deliver the more surprising aspects of the Gospel to them.

- **By emphasizing standards over requirements.** In all my years of religious education, no one ever fell in love with Jesus because I required them to attend twenty out of twenty-one sessions to receive their sacrament. Participants in my catechetical programs fell in love with Jesus and the demands of discipleship after encountering Him, through Scripture, through Church teaching, through the liturgy, and through the Christian community. As we build our catechetical programs, we must put together requirements that serve the purpose of conversion, not requirements that simply make our lives as coordinators more manageable. People today want to know why we are asking them to be catechized and why they are asked to fulfill the particular requirements of our program. The better I upheld the standard (such as loving God with our whole hearts, or the importance of attending Mass every Sunday, or being formed in the teachings of Christ), the better I could help them see their need for formation. Knowing the standards (which are so clearly communicated in the rites of the RCIA), I could adapt my requirements as needed to truly help the person be open to Christ. The requirements in my program serve the person, not the person the requirements.

Invite the sheep to invite other sheep

At every catechetical session, *we have to give the call to our participants to be inviting others into our events, and in particular, to the Sunday Mass.* In order to ask our participants to invite others, we have to first model this outreach by getting out of our comfort zones, inviting those we find difficult to invite. Providing flyers and publicity cards to our participants is a great way to empower them to proactively share their faith.

Send the sheep out on mission

Every catechetical encounter *needs to invite the person to some form of mission that the person can accomplish within the given week.* What will the participant take from our catechesis that will make a difference in the world? This is the true calling of the laity, to impact the temporal order, our daily lives. By challenging them to bring Christ into the temporal order, they will begin to uncover their vocation. The true success of our catechesis is what the person does when they leave our program, not in the number of participants at our meetings. We need to be constantly inviting them to the next opportunity at the parish to grow in their faith, mission and their vocation.

Working Together

Evangelization is an activity of the Holy Spirit, but the Holy Spirit does not work alone. You and I are called to work with the Holy Spirit to help others know and love Jesus. How we prepare others to hear the Good News will be a 'make or break' activity in our catechesis. We know from the mistakes catechists have made that this preparation is essential to good formation. Without the proper foundation, those we serve in our catechetical sessions will not be able to grow deeper in their conversion to Christ. Let us ask the Holy Spirit to have a heart of love for those He gives us, that we may convey to them in word and deed the depths of His love for them.

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