

# Journeying Toward A Future Full of Promise



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CATECHESIS IN NEW YORK STATE  
REFLECTIONS AND CHALLENGES

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The Bishops of New York State  
in consultation with  
The New York State Council of  
Diocesan Directors of Religious Education

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# Catechesis: The Lifelong Journey

"As the twentieth century draws to a close, the Church is bidden by God and by events - each of them a call from Him - to renew her trust in catechetical activity as a prime aspect of her mission." (*Catechesi Tradendae*, 15)

For all ages the Church must carry out a continuous and often counter cultural mission of announcing the Gospel and inviting the response of faith to God's redemptive action among us. Such catechesis is a lifelong process and a primary task of the Christian community. It is with deep love for the faith and with eagerness to share knowledge and love of the Triune God with people of all ages that we offer the following reflections.

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## A New Emphasis

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"Catechesis is an esteemed term in Christian tradition. Its purpose is to make a person's faith become living, conscious, and active, through the light of instruction." (*National Catechetical Directory*, 32)

As we look to the future of the Church, we become aware of the need for new emphasis on an integrated, on-going process of catechesis for all ages. We believe such emphasis is imperative because of the pastoral conditions facing the Church today.

Because of the broad diversity of education and ethnicity and the multiple challenges of pluralism in the adult populations we serve, there is a wide spectrum of attitudes and practices current among Catholics today. For some the Church

"Faith does not insulate us from the daily challenges of life but intensifies our desire to address them precisely in the light of the gospel which has come to us in the person of Jesus Christ."

(*The Challenge of Peace:  
God's Promise and  
Our Response*)

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is a trusted guide for religious and moral living. For others it lacks credibility as teacher; for others the Church is seen through the eyes of distant childhood catechesis, little touched by the renewal fostered by Vatican II. Attitudes of exaggerated individualism and exaggerated freedom make moral norms unacceptable or reduce such norms to a bland response. The technological and individualistic culture which shapes so much of American consciousness presents a real challenge to the proclamation of the core Gospel message.

"This century thirsts for authenticity. Do you really believe what you are proclaiming? Do you live what you believe? Do you preach what you live? The world expects from us simplicity of life, the spirit of prayer, obedience, humility, detachment, and self-sacrifice."

(*Evangelii Nuntiandi* #76)

Within such a culture and amid such diversity, the role of the Church as Teacher in general, and the role of catechesis in particular, needs clear affirmation as to its legitimacy and its breadth of audience. The bishops and pastors are guarantors of the Church's teaching mission (Canons 773, 775, 776, 777) and share the mission of catechizing with persons whom they delegate to organize and enliven its implementation.

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#### Ongoing, Lifelong Catechesis

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We clearly affirm the importance of strong, effective catechesis for children and youth. Every parish is called to provide adequate opportunities for the formation of children and adolescents.

We also recognize the role of parents as the primary religious educators of their children. We believe that as a Church we are lacking in ways to en flesh that ideal more effectively. To quote Pope John Paul II: "Family catechesis... precedes, accompanies, and enriches all other forms of catechesis." (*Catechesi Tradendae*, 68)

General reminders to parents of this God-given role of teacher are not sufficient. In collaboration with parish catechetical leaders, we need to build-in tested methods and models of calling parents to this role and actively enabling them to carry it out with competence and authenticity.

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At the same time, we also need to be sensitive to the many challenges and pressures which parents face today. In our experience, parent sacramental preparation programs (Baptism, Reconciliation, Eucharist, and Confirmation) are important teaching moments when many parents are receptive to a deepening of their own faith and to their role as catechists to their children.

The Church has repeatedly affirmed adult catechesis. Yet, effective implementation of such catechesis for most Catholics is still lacking. The strides made in recent years are notable, such as the success of renewal programs, the growing phenomenon of small faith-sharing groups, adult study groups centered on scripture, etc. These positive signs ought to become more regular and normative in ordinary Catholic life, rather than special experiences for a minority of our people. Therefore, we highly encourage local churches to promote and model more adult oriented religious formation.

The recent plan for implementation of the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults, approved by the Bishops of the United States, gives new credibility and impetus to adult faith formation. There is a need to work together on diocesan and parochial levels so that the spirit and principles of the Rite truly guide our communities in responding to adult faith needs and the expectations of the whole Church for a more authentically lived faith.

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#### Variety of Approaches

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In our catechetical efforts we believe that many groups need the demonstrated compassion and welcome of the Church. In urban, suburban, and rural settings the unchurched or church-alienated families must be seen as requiring our attention. We support programs and settings that offer the hospitality of the faith community and invite these families to our parishes. This attention needs to be provided especially for

"It is true to say life is a pilgrimage of discovery, the discovery of who you are, the discovery of values that shape your life."

*Pope John Paul II*

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"You must go out into the byroads and invite to the wedding anyone you come upon."

Matthew 22

individuals in families of social and ethnic minorities, as well as those people with handicapping conditions and their families.

Large numbers of young people of high school and college age are loosely connected to the Church, if at all. This is a pressing concern which warrants priority attention. Despite achievements in Confirmation preparation, youth ministry communities, retreat models, and the like, few of us are satisfied that we reach the young to the extent that they feel affirmed by the church, bonded to it, and eager to minister within it. Here, too, there is a need to evangelize and catechize in far more effective ways. Catechetical ministry is a crucial part of the Church's work with youth and young adults.

Finally, a majority of our people still receive much of their information on religious and moral issues from other sources in our culture, especially the media. Too few know how to take to heart their baptismal vocation of witnessing to Christ in their lives, and of forming their consciences according to the teaching of the Church. We encourage the Church to utilize the media more fully as a unique and effective vehicle for catechesis.

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#### Head and Heart

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Because of the importance of catechesis with children, one further concern needs serious attention: the balance of the cognitive and affective dimensions of catechesis, that is, the head and the heart. Toward Effective Parish Religious Education for Children and Young People, a recent National Catholic Educational Association study of selected, effective, parish-based religious education programs for children and youth, finds weaknesses in the cognitive area.

Even in the best of catechetical programs, knowledge about the teachings of our faith does not match up to the high levels of affective relationship to God and faith community. The familiar "warm images



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of God, Jesus, and Mary," so characteristic of young people in these programs, need a balance in the knowledge and appropriate appreciation of the symbols, words, and concepts which comprise the language of and rationale of our faith and Church. This need may be met through the use of instruments like REOI (Religious Education Outcomes Inventory), REKAP (Religious Education Outcomes Inventory of Knowledge, Attitudes, and Practices), and REDI (Religious Education Developmental Inventory) that enable faith communities to gauge with considerable accuracy cognitive and behavioral outcomes of their youth programs.

In addition to the above concerns regarding the vital catechesis of children, we believe our dioceses and parishes must address these additional areas:

- seeking out those children who are not registered in any catechetical program;
- providing solid catechesis in human sexuality;
- taking special care to offer strong catechetical programs to the poor.

In conclusion, catechesis for all ages is, and must continue to be, among the highest priorities of our Church, deserving of our best resources and energies.

As part of our response to these broad concerns, we support the development of a statement of Church teachings and catechetical principles which would guide this ministry at all levels.

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# Catechetical Leaders on the Journey of Faith

"The Church is bidden to offer catechesis her best resources in people and energy, without sparing effort, toil, or material means, in order to organize it better and to train qualified personnel." (*Catechesi Tradendae*, 15)

All members of the Church are challenged to share in the catechetical ministry by witnessing to their faith. Some, however, are called to distinct catechetical roles. Parents, teachers, 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.

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## Effective Catechetical Programs

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One of the most pressing challenges facing the Church at any time is the development of effective catechetical programs to foster the faith-life of adults, adolescents, and children. In the United States, two important structures have evolved within the Church to assist in the catechetical ministry especially for children and adults. One structure is the Catholic school, which is designed to integrate academics, values, and faith; the other structure is parish-based religious education. Designed predominantly for those who do not attend parochial schools, parish religious education usually involves a weekly catechetical program. These programs are

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focused largely on faith development and sacramental preparation.

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### Catechist Formation

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It is recognized that the fruitfulness of the Catholic school experience in fostering a community of faith can be attributed in part to the preparation and support of a professional administrator. Likewise, parish religious education programs also benefit greatly from the competency of a professional catechetical leader.

Presently in New York State there are 1,766 parishes (including some 55 missions). Fewer than half of these parishes have on staff a religious educator paid to work full time in the catechetical ministry.

Each New York State diocese has set academic and professional standards as part of the qualifications for the position of DRE/CRE. It is necessary to uphold these standards to ensure the most effective catechetical ministry.

We see a constant need to recognize and affirm our catechetical leadership (both parish and diocesan). For both groups we must address such legitimate concerns as just and adequate compensation, benefits, and skills development. The faith-life of the catechetical leader is also of specific concern. Community, spirituality, and worship are needs of all believers and especially of those engaged in ministry. Attention to these many concerns may stem the tide of many competent professionals changing positions frequently, or worse, leaving the catechetical ministry entirely.

Parish and diocesan personnel need to work together to ensure that there are opportunities for volunteer catechists to develop their own personal and communal faith, their spiritual life, their knowledge and understanding of Church doctrine and tradition, their skills, abilities and competencies. Only through fully developed courses, diverse teaching/learning programs, liturgical experiences, classes, seminars,

“Without the Way, there is no going.  
Without the Truth, there is no knowing.  
Without the Life, there is no living.

*Thomas a Kempis*

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retreats, study groups, etc. - at parish, regional, diocesan levels - will we be able to realize the vision of quality religious education for all.

"Modern men and women listen more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and when they do listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses. It is therefore primarily by her conduct, by her living witness of fidelity to the Lord Jesus, that the Church will evangelize the world."

(*Evangelii Nuntiandi* #41)

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### The Role of Priests

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Priests need to accept their rightful place as a source of leadership, cooperation and support for those involved in the catechetical ministry at all levels. The language of the church documents regarding the essential role of the priest in catechesis is crystal clear and very distinct (Canons 773-777, 779, 780). This role should never be abandoned.

The Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests (1966) refers to bishops, pastors, and associate priests as "instructors in the faith." In (*Catechesi Tradendae*, 64), Pope John Paul states, "The Church expects you to neglect nothing with a view to a well organized and well oriented catechetical effort. All believers have a right to catechesis; all pastors have the duty to provide it."

It follows, then, that seminary preparation in catechesis is essential to an integrated approach to priestly formation. And because, "the pastor is primarily responsible for seeing to it that the catechetical needs, goals, and priorities of the parish are identified, articulated and met" (*National Catechetical Directory*, 217), it is also imperative that priests continue their own education in methodology, psychology, scripture, theology, etc., after ordination.

Religious education cannot be an aspect of ministry assigned to only one group within the Church. That the whole Church is both the provider and recipient of catechetical formation is a point repeatedly emphasized by many sources: In To Teach as Jesus Did, we are reminded that "proclaiming the gospel is the perennial task and joy of the Church of Jesus Christ."

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# Proposals For A Challenging Future

In response to the pressing needs noted above, the Bishops of New York as primary catechists propose the following.

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## State Level

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It is recommended:

- that the Diocesan Directors of Religious Education provide a compendium of Church teachings and catechetical principles to be used by Diocesan Offices of Religious Education to ensure full and authentic catechesis for Catholics of all ages;
- that the Diocesan Directors, together with other appropriate entities, develop a coordinated plan to assist bishops, priests, and deacons in their ministry as ordained leaders.

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## Diocesan Level

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It is recommended:

- that each Diocese support the Diocesan Religious Education Office through adequate financing of staff and programs to enable this office to exert leadership in all areas of catechesis;
- that each Diocesan Office of Religious Education:
  - be involved in the process of recruiting and hiring parish religious education leaders;

- be responsible for the establishment of criteria for certification of parish religious education leaders and their on-going formation;
- foster adult faith development by offering opportunities for the preparation and on-going formation of catechists, both professional and volunteer;
- work with catechetical institutes and graduate schools of religious education and pastoral ministry to help ensure that their programs offer sound theological and pastoral formation;
- develop, with other appropriate agencies, a plan for the implementation of the Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults, with particular attention to the catechetical components of the process;
- collaborate more actively with other diocesan offices, such as liturgy, social concerns, and Catholic schools in order to model the collaboration which is essential on the parish level;
- ensure that the catechesis of children and adolescents is a priority, with parental and family involvement as critical components of catechesis at these age levels; ensure that effective models for catechesis are being developed to meet the needs of families;
- develop, in collaboration with the appropriate diocesan office, an aggressive and integrated plan of youth ministry of which catechesis is an essential part;

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- provide for continued development of printed and audio-visual media resources which would be available to constituents;
  - make every effort to initiate or strengthen catechetical programs for persons with special educational needs;
  - develop and maintain ways for bishops, pastors, and other Church leaders to recognize and affirm all catechetical ministers;
  - respect the uniqueness of each parish and stand ready to assist each parish in the fulfillment of its canonical mission to provide for the faith development of all its people;
  - implement catechetical models which reflect sensitivity to, and acceptance of, ethnic and cultural diversification.

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#### Parish Level

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It is recommended that each parish:

- have available to it the services of a professional religious educator, where feasible; (Parishes, in cooperation with diocesan offices and with one another, should develop various models of cooperative effort to help ensure the realization of this high priority.)
- assure just compensation for its catechetical leaders, and adequate funding for its various catechetical programs;
- recognize and ensure the vital role of the priest in the

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catechetical ministry as one of leadership, support, encouragement, empowerment, and teaching itself;

- recognize the importance of the formation and training of volunteer catechists and Catholic school teachers, and cooperate in diocesan formation and certification programs;
- recognize the essential place for catechesis, as well as the importance of appropriate adult learning methods in the RCIA process;
- ensure that full, authentic Catholic teaching is evident at all levels of catechesis;
- exert special effort to invite and encourage children and adolescents, especially those not yet catechized, to participate in religious education programs;
- focus attention and resources on developing a comprehensive program of youth ministry, of which catechesis is an essential part. (Particular attention should be paid to those programs involving post confirmation students.)
- maintain appropriate printed and audio-visual media resources which complement resources available through diocesan media centers;
- make every effort to initiate and/or strengthen catechetical programs for persons with special educational needs;
- implement catechetical models which reflect sensitivity to and acceptance of ethnic and cultural diversification.



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# Conclusion

True growth in faith is always a gift of God. "I planted the seed and Apollos watered it, but God made it grow." (1 Cor. 3, 6). Effective catechesis "is intended to make people's faith become living, conscious, and active." (*Christus Dominus*, 14) Solid catechesis demands significant human effort in the areas of planning, performance, and evaluation, as well as the personal qualities and commitment of all people involved. It especially depends upon the faith, hope, and love of the catechist. The personal witness to faith of the catechist, whether the catechist be parent, teacher, religious, priest, bishop, or any other of God's people, plays the most significant role in catechesis.

"For I know well the plans I have in mind for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare, not for woe! Plans to give you a future full of hope." (Jeremiah 29:11) It is our prayer that the future of catechesis be a future full of hope and promise.

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