

Family-Centered Catechesis

The family is defined as a “domestic Church,” that is, in every Christian family the different aspects and functions of the life of the entire Church may be reflected: mission, catechesis, witness, prayer, etc. Indeed in the same way as the Church, the family is a place in which the Gospel is transmitted and from which it extends.

Parents are the primary educators in the faith. Together with them, all members of the family play an active part in the education of the younger members.

The family as a locus of catechesis has an unique privilege: to transmit the Gospel by rooting it in the context of profound human values. Rooted in the family experience, the child’s Christian initiation consists in:

*the awakening of the sense of God;
the first steps in prayer;
education of the moral conscience;
formation in the Christian sense of human love,
understood as a reflection of the love of God the
Father, the Creator.*

It is, indeed, a Christian education more witnessed to than taught, more occasional than systematic, more ongoing and daily than structured into periods. In this family catechesis, the role of grandparents is of growing importance. Their wisdom and sense of the religious is often decisive in creating a true Christian climate.

(GDC 255)

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Orientation to Family-Centered Catechesis

Family Catechesis Precedes, Accompanies, and Enriches All Forms of Catechesis.

The witness of Christian life given by parents in the family comes to children with tenderness and parental respect. Children thus perceive and joyously live the closeness of God and of Jesus made manifest by their parents in such a way that this first Christian experience frequently leaves decisive traces which last throughout life. This childhood religious awakening which takes place in the family is irreplaceable. It is consolidated when, on the occasion of certain family events and festivities, care is taken to explain in the home the Christian or religious content of these events. It is deepened all the more when parents comment on the more methodical catechesis which their children later receive in the Christian community and help them to appropriate it. (GDC 226)

Characteristics of Family-Centered Catechesis (GDC 227)

- Parent-Guided

It is provided primarily by the adults in the family who share faith with one another and with the younger members and who set an example of faith lived.

Education in faith by parents, which should begin from the children's most tender age, is already being given when the members of a family help each other to grow in faith through the witness of their Christian lives, a witness that is often without words, but which perseveres throughout a day to day life in accordance with the Gospel. (CT 68)

- Life Giving

The religious awakening of the child takes place in the family. It is there that the child first experiences and practices the faith. Those who give life to the child bring the child through Baptism to Life in the Kingdom of God and continually nurture that life. (GDC 177-178)

- Life-Long

As the children grow and mature, the witness and teaching of the parents continue to profoundly affect their lives. The scope of family catechesis is life-long. As the family membership broadens, neither age nor role dictate who is learner and who is teacher. Each member of the family becomes teacher and learner by virtue of a sincere attempt to hear the message of the Gospel and to respond to it in worship and service (GDC 227).

- Missionary

By making Gospel values the foundation for their way of life, parents prepare their children to bring these values into the environments where they will study, work and socialize. Family members recognize and live the Christian call to serve neighbors, friends, parish community and the broader communities of Church and world. By the witness of its life together, the family evangelizes the wider communities of which it is a part (GDC 211).

The Christian family also builds up the Kingdom of God in history through the everyday realities that concern and distinguish its state of life. It is thus in the love between the husband and wife and between the members of the family – a love lived out in all its extraordinary richness of values and demands: totality, oneness, fidelity and fruitfulness – that the family participation in the prophetic, priestly and kingly mission of Jesus Christ and his Church finds realization. Therefore, love and life constitute the nucleus of the saving mission of the Christian Family in the Church and for the Church. (Familiaris Consortio 50)

- Implicit and Explicit

Implicit catechesis is experienced through the atmosphere that permeates the home where children perceive and joyously live the closeness to God in Jesus made manifest by their parents. Explicit catechesis is experienced through the parents' articulation of their faith through such means as teaching, prayer and moral guidance (GDC 226).

Parish Approaches to Family-Centered Catechesis (GDC 227)

The various approaches to Family-Centered Catechesis are different but complementary. Some combination of the following approaches is essential for the parish community:

- Parish-wide efforts to help families understand themselves as the “Domestic Church” and to live out of this understanding. These efforts include, but are not limited to, education in:
 - scriptural and theological foundations of faith,
 - spirituality (e.g. focus on the holiness inherent in family living),
 - psychology (e.g. parenting skills, stages of human development, family systems),
 - catechetics (e.g. focus on teachable moments in the home),
 - social justice (e.g. ways to reach out as a family to the poor and marginalized);
- Liturgical celebrations and prayer opportunities for families such as:
 - Heightened focus on events in family life in the Sunday liturgies (e.g. Baptisms, First Reception of Holy Communion, Mothers’ Day, Father’s Day).
 - Family retreat opportunities (e.g. Reconciliation evening for families)
 - Advent wreath-making for families,
 - Mass of celebration for all graduates of the parish and their families,
 - Welcome Mass for new families;
- Meetings on single topics such as:
 - celebrating and ritualizing faith in the context of family life,
 - celebrating liturgical seasons in the home,
 - family attendance at the Eucharistic celebration,
 - ways of praying together as a family,
 - celebrating human experiences in the family such as birth, new beginnings, transitions, death,
 - Individual moral issues that particularly challenge families,
 - pro-life in the family context
 - dealing with addictive behavior,
 - divorce, separation, annulment questions and their impact on children and youth;
- Marriage preparation programs (Go to Marriage section on Archdiocesan Family Life/Respect Life website (www.nyfamilylife.org))
- Prenatal and pre-infant baptismal catechesis to help parents prepare for the religious upbringing of their children;
- Parish network of support for families, offering counseling, referral capabilities, peer group support.

Role of Religious Education Program in Family-Centered Catechesis

The Religious Education Program complements the foundational education in faith already given by the parents. It furthers the child's growth in faith by giving specific religious instruction which builds upon and reinforces the positive faith development fostered by the parents. On entering the parish religious education program the child begins to study in a community much wider than the family.

For those children who lack adequate religious formation in the home, the parish community can play an especially important role. The parish does so by assisting parents to grow in their understanding of the faith, by helping parents return to the regular practice of the faith, and by providing children with initiatory experiences and explanation of their faith. (*GDC 179-180*).

The Sacramental Life of the child begun at Baptism continues with the reception of the Sacraments of Penance, Eucharist, and Confirmation, a process prepared for by the parents and the Religious Education Program working together.

As the child matures, the faith witness of Christians in the wider community becomes increasingly important. The Religious Education Program provides the necessary experience of belonging to and interacting in church community. This prepares the way for participation in liturgy and parish life.

The pre-kindergarten through eighth grade program gives the student the opportunity for a systematic presentation of the faith and at the same time the benefit of a variety of personality and teaching styles through the different Catechists they encounter.

In older adolescence when the influence of the peer group increases greatly, youth ministry within the parish provides a faith-centered experience, a safe place to search for authenticity as a believer and a forum for facing the moral challenges of today's society.

Approved Models for Formal Family Catechesis in Parish Religious Education Programs

Archdiocesan Mandate for Family Catechesis

Students in Grades K – 8 are to participate in five hours of Family Catechesis every year. Family Catechesis opportunities can be offered any time from September through August. Family catechesis can be done through any combination model or method listed below.

The Parish Director of Religious Education should appoint a Family Catechesis team leader and team members. The Parish Director of Religious Education, the Pastor and the team choose the model to be followed for the family catechesis event but the implementation of the model is delegated to the team leader.

Goals / Mission for Family Catechesis in Parish Religious Education

- To help families learn how to pray and to discuss their faith together
- To help parents better understand their role as primary catechists
- To bring families together in order to share and deepen their Catholic faith
- To strengthen the relationship between the family and the Church
- To establish ongoing Catholic faith practices within the family life
- To integrate the family into the parish community

Nine Models of Family Catechesis

1.) Intergenerational Whole Community Family Catechesis

The program lasts for 2.5 hours and parents stay together with their children for the entire time
The Program design has 6 steps:

- Step 1: Hospitality / Meal
- Step 2: Opening Prayer
- Step 3: Introduction of Theme to Whole Group
- Step 4: In-Depth Learning (Whole Group or Activity Stations)
- Step 5: Shared Learning Summary, Explain Home Kit
- Step 6: Closing Prayer

2.) Intergenerational Whole Community Family Catechesis (Modified)

Parents are separated from children for Step #4 (in-depth learning).
The Parish Director and the Team leader may select from among the 6 Design Steps listed in model 1 those which they will use for this program.

3.) Multi-Media Family Catechesis

Families watch a movie that offers a Catholic moral / theological teaching and that is age-appropriate. A short clip or portion of the movie is shown, one at a time. After each clip, the families engage in discussion on reflection questions provided.

4.) Family Prayer Celebration

Families participate together in a Catholic devotion or other Catholic prayer service e.g. rosary, stations of the cross, Eucharistic adoration.

Some direction is offered before the ritual / prayer experience and after the ritual, the families engage in discussion on reflection questions. Then, they are given an activity / review sheet to be brought home.

5.) Activity – Centered Family Catechesis

Families participate in an arts & craft activity together that offers a Catholic moral / theological teaching and/or practice. They start with some or all of the following: hospitality / prayer / introduction to theme. Reflection questions are then given to the families for discussion either at the parish or at home.

6.) Family Christian Service Project

Families participate in a Christian Service project accomplished together at the parish or outside the parish. The families are offered reflection questions for discussion after the service project is done. After the service project is complete, the families are given an activity review sheet to be brought home

7.) Family Christian Holiday Celebration

Families participate in a Christian Holiday meal or tradition together at the parish. This is followed by a discussion on reflection questions. At the conclusion of the experience, the families are given an activity / review sheet to be brought home.

8.) Family Pilgrimage

Families participate in a pilgrimage together, visiting a holy / sacred site. After the pilgrimage, the families are offered reflection questions for family discussion. After the pilgrimage and discussion, the families are given an activity / review sheet to be brought home.

9.) Family Retreat Day

Families participate in a retreat experience together. The retreat day offers time for prayer, reflection, discussion, and community building.

Informal Family-Centered Catechesis in the Religious Education Program

The parish Religious Education Program continuously provides for the strong involvement of all the parents of its children by offering:

- Opportunities for direct service such as:
 - Catechist for those who are called to, and gifted for, this ministry,
 - Catechist assistant in classroom, office, areas to be supervised,
 - Parental participant throughout the year in outreach projects such as Thanksgiving baskets, Christmas donations, visits to nursing homes, provision of food for the needy,
 - Member of parent advisory committee, Religious Education development committee, or other groups working for the Religious Education Program;
- Regular opportunity for parent observation of religious education sessions;
- Meetings throughout the year to consult parents, to evaluate appropriate aspects of the program, to assist parents in their role as the primary educators of their children, to insure that the parents are knowledgeable about all aspects of the program;
- Parent meetings held annually on topics such as: education of the child in human sexuality, parent-child communication, influence of media and technology on the young;
- Frequent communication, formal as well as informal, with parents of children and youth in program;

Sensitivity to the needs and desires of families must permeate all the dimensions of the parish Religious Education Program and indeed of all parish life. *The care of the family always remains central, since it is the primary agent of an incarnate transmission of the faith.* (GDC 207)

Home Schooling in Religious Education

A home-schooling Religious Education program is one in which the children of the family are instructed in the faith at home by their own parents.

Parents ask the Church for their child to be baptized. The Church blesses their request with the prayer: that “. . . they will be the first teachers of their children in the ways of faith. May they be also the best teachers, bearing witness to the faith by what they say and do.” Parents who take this blessing to heart understand that they begin, support and maintain religious education within the family, “the domestic church”. Parents teach their children to pray and, to begin to live a good Christian life. Thus, children are first educated in faith through spirituality shared and morality modeled.

In addition to the formation they experience in the home, children need to learn to articulate their faith. Responding to this need, the Church provides parish-based religious education, offered by Catechists trained to teach the faith in age-appropriate ways. Gathering for religious education in a parish setting helps children to experience the importance of the Christian community and provides a setting in which they learn to express their faith outside the home. Parents support this effort by making sure that the lived experience of their child corresponds with what they learn.

The Request by Parents to Home-School their Children in the Catholic Faith

The Pastor is responsible for the catechetical ministry of the parish assuring that its educational and formational elements present faithfully the Gospel and the Catholic faith tradition (*Canons 773, 776 and 777*). Therefore, any request for a home-school program that replaces attendance at the parish Religious Education Program must be for a serious reason and for a limited time. The request is carefully discerned by the Pastor and the Director of Religious Education, with the final permission given by the Pastor.

All home schooling is conducted under the Pastor’s authority. It is overseen either by the Pastor himself or by the Parish Director delegated by the Pastor (*Canon 774*).

Home schooling in the faith does not exempt the families from participation in the Archdiocesan Family Catechesis mandate of a minimum of 5 hours of formal family catechesis provided for each child every year and offered any time between September and August.

Norms for Home-Schooling in Religious Education

The Director works closely with the parents to help them understand the responsibilities they incur if they opt to replace the role of the Parish Religious Education Program.

- The textbook and teaching materials used must be approved by the parish Director of Religious Education.
- The *Archdiocesan Guidelines for Catechesis* must be carefully followed and their content taught in its entirety.
- Parents conducting home schooling sessions must participate in and complete the *Archdiocesan Catechist Formation Program*.
- Parents in their teaching receive regular direction and guidance from the Parish Director of Religious Education.

Several times a year, the parish Director meets with those children who are learning their faith through home schooling to assess their progress by means of an objective evaluation tool. The Director informs the Pastor of the results of each child's assessment and submits to him a judgment as to the objective effectiveness of the home-schooling process for each individual child.

- The support of the parish faith community is crucial to the child's understanding of the Church, of Liturgy, and of the Gospel Life. Therefore, the home school should include a parish component in which participants gather regularly with other children of their age for information, faith sharing, community building and service opportunities. Home schooling should also take advantage of appropriate Religious Education events and activities of the parish.

Preparation for the First Reception of Sacraments for Families doing Home Schooling

The Pastor has the responsibility to ensure that the sacramental preparation of those in his parish is both adequate and in conformity with Catholic teaching (*Canon 843 and 890*).

Catechesis for Sacraments is an essentially ecclesial act (GDC 78) and therefore not an action which can be realized in the community on a private basis or by purely personal initiative (GDC 219b). Catechesis for Sacraments always takes place in a parish-based program.

Therefore, the sacramental preparation for children being educated by home schooling must follow the guidelines and directives given in the chapter of the Handbook entitled *Coordination of Sacrament Programs*. It must be overseen by the parish Director of Religious Education under the authority of the Pastor.

In addition, these children as well as their parents, must participate in the parish-based program of immediate preparation for the reception of a Sacrament according to the Handbook chapter on Sacrament Programs.

The readiness of the child for the reception of the Sacrament will be mutually determined by the parents and the pastor (*Canon 914*).

The Sacraments are to be celebrated in the family's parish of registration where they worship regularly.

Parents who home-school children who are not yet baptized but are of catechetical age and have attained the use of reason, are to enroll their children in the parish catechumenate program. These children/youth are to receive Baptism, Confirmation and Eucharist in that order in one single ceremony preferably at the Easter Vigil, together with the older catechumens. (*RCIA National Statutes 18*)