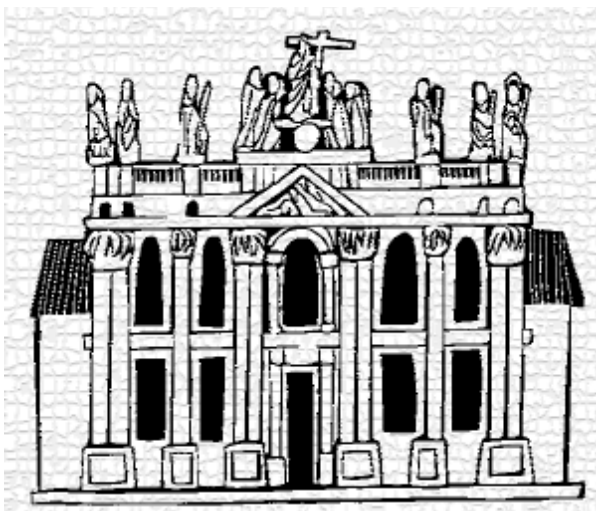


PROGRAM STRUCTURES

GENERAL INTRODUCTION

“The parish is a community of the Christian faithful established within a diocese. The pastoral care of a parish is entrusted to a pastor under the authority of the diocesan bishop. The parish is ‘the primary experience of the Church’ for most Catholics. (*OHWB*, #114)...It is ‘the living and permanent environment for growth in the faith.’ (*GDC*, #158) The parish energizes the faithful to carry out Christ’s mission by providing spiritual, moral, and material support for the regular and continuing catechetical development of the parishioners.

The parish is the preeminent place for the catechesis of adults, youth, and children. ‘Knowledge of the faith, liturgical life, the following of Christ are all a gift of the Spirit which are received in prayer, and similarly a duty of spiritual and moral study and witness. Neither aspect may be neglected.’ Pastors have the duty to provide catechesis; parishioners have the reciprocal duty to participate in and support the catechetical activities of the parish. Parish catechetical efforts should be in harmony with the catechetical goals and objectives of the diocese. *NDC*, Ch. 8, #60, P.254



The parish is the Church’s prime agent for religious education. In a broad sense the parish educates through everything it does. The parish community forms its members by the way it worships. It leads the parishioners to an understanding of what it means to be Church through the kinds of services provided to them. The parish teaches its members about charity through the contributions given for those in need and about justice by the stands it takes on social and moral issues of the day.

While parents and families retain an essential role in the formation of their children as witnesses to the faith through both word and example (*Gravissimum Educationis*, #3; *Code of Canon Law*, c.226), the parish also retains a specific and defined function in the formation of children and adults (*Catechesi Tradendae*, #67-69). It is the parish as a whole which is the driving force in any organized and systematic effort at religious education. The entire parish educates in a formal way through programs of adult formation and Catholic education for all children and youth, both in the parish religious education and school programs while supporting those involved in homeschooling.

RELIGIOUS EDUCATION PROGRAM STRUCTURES

GENERAL INTRODUCTION, CONT'D



A successful religious education program requires the support of the parish in specific areas. The parish bears the responsibility to secure qualified catechetical leaders and catechists and to see to their ongoing ministerial development. The parish must provide appropriate and sufficient materials and equipment, including suitable facilities for religious education. It must assess and strive to improve the quality of its religious education programs and staff. These tasks are not simply to be done in the name of the parish by the pastor and

parish staff. The whole parish is obligated to see to it that these duties are accomplished (*Catechesi Tradendae*, #67).

Quality religious education demands that suitable leadership be present to provide both vision and direction. Leadership in religious education is required to meet the growing challenges of contemporary society. Excellence in religious education is most likely to happen when religious education leaders have the



necessary competencies to provide knowledgeable and motivational leadership in all the areas that make up a complete religious education program. These competencies are completely outlined in the *National Certification Standards for Professional Parish Directors of Religious Education* written by the National Conference of Catechetical Leadership and approved by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops Commission on Certification and Accreditation.

RELIGIOUS EDUCATION PROGRAM STRUCTURES

DEVELOPING A PARISH PROGRAM

OVERVIEW

Effective program development requires knowledge and skills in a wide variety of disciplines. Several of these areas are the nature, purpose and content of catechesis, faith and psychological development theory, teaching/learning theory and teaching methodology, sociological theory regarding family life and family systems, and sensitivity to a multi-cultural population as well as to those with special needs.

The most fundamental responsibility of a religious education leader is to develop and manage the parish's catechetical program. The *National Certification Standards* describe this responsibility by stating that religious education leaders "collaborate with others in creating a culture of formation within their faith communities that enables each committed Christian to nurture and grow in their relationship with God. As such the catechetical leader will be well formed in the study of Catechesis—its theology, its history, and its right praxis. (*National Certification Standards, 2011, NCCL/Catechetical Leader (CL) Specialized Competencies.*)

The first step in building an effective program is to have a clear understanding of what is meant by the word "program." Stated simply, a catechetical program is a means to an end. It is like a machine one constructs to produce a particular product. The nature of the machine built is determined by the kind of end product one hopes to produce. Just as one must not confuse the machine with the product it produces, so one should not confuse a catechetical program with the goal it is intended to develop. When either a particular machine or catechetical program/methodology is not achieving the desired end result, then it should be overhauled.

Program development begins with a clear, comprehensive mission statement that embodies a particular vision and understanding of catechesis and clearly articulates that which one wishes to achieve. Such a mission statement must be rooted in the documents that summarize the Church's catechetical tradition. Catechesis must always be situated within the larger mission of the parish and the Church, because catechesis itself is a means to that greater end. Only a clearly articulated mission statement can help avoid the trap of programs for the sake of programs instead of programs for the sake of mission.

DEVELOPING A PARISH PROGRAM

OVERVIEW CONT'D

A catechetical program needs to function as a partner with the many other parish ministries and activities that are also fostering growth in discipleship. Therefore, as much as possible, one needs to seek the advice and collaboration of the other parish ministries when developing a mission statement and establishing goals. The program should seek to utilize rather than compete with existing formative and instructional experiences already available, such as the Sunday liturgy, justice and peace projects promoted by social concerns committees, small Christian communities, and youth ministry events if the youth ministry program is distinct from the catechetical program. The old adage “there’s no need to reinvent the wheel” is a good principle to respect as one considers program development.

Once the parish has developed a clear mission statement and has established goals, the religious education leader is then faced with the need for updating or adjusting the program to bring it in line with some of the changing circumstances of the parish or recent developments in catechesis. This dimension of program development requires the religious education leader to see and understand themselves as agents of change. Being able to recognize the need for change and leading people through change is an integral skill of program development.

Sometimes the programming adjustment may seem minor, like the need to update textbooks. Experience shows, however, that even small changes can be upsetting to those affected. Veteran catechists, for example, may have become comfortable with the old textbooks and may resist attempts to introduce a new or revised series.

Therefore, when faced with the need to introduce changes in an existing program, consider the following: move slowly; consult sensitively and attentively with those who are most affected by the proposed changes, communicate in every possible way the reasons for the proposed changes, check often to be certain the reasons are accurately understood, and use the proper channels to ensure support of the parish leadership. If one is patient, sensitive and reasonable, any good existing program can be developed into a better one.

