

TEXTBOOK SELECTION

FOUNDATIONAL PRINCIPLE: CATECHESIS EXAMINED

Every activity of the Church has certain catechetical implications and many authentic religious experiences that foster personal faith development occur spontaneously. These religious experiences, the work of the Holy Spirit, are always significant to the sanctification of the world. This policy section, however, explores that dimension of religious education typically referred to as “intentional catechesis.” In *CT* #21, Pope John Paul II uses the term “systematic” to describe this dimension of catechetical activity.

Pope John Paul II in *CT* #20 (paraphrased in *CCC* #23) states that the aim of catechesis is to assist the believer to know Jesus better, to know his mystery and the requirements and promises contained in his Gospel message. This “knowing” is an evolutionary process, and believers are assisted to grow and mature as they reach out to know more profoundly the meaning of this Word for their life and living. The word knowing as used by the Pope in this context should not be understood in a narrow “merely intellectual” sense. **Both the NCD and CT urge parish catechetical leaders to guide a serious and orderly study of the message of Christ in a systematic way, integrating life experience, liturgical expression and religious practices with tradition and doctrine.** Thus, systematic catechesis can be defined as the orderly study of and commitment to the Christian mystery.

Four elements distinguish systematic catechesis from other forms of the presentation of the Word (such as evangelization):

1. It is programmed to reach a precise goal.
2. It deals with essentials, without any claim to address all disputed questions or to transform itself into theological or scientific exegesis.
3. It must, nevertheless, be sufficiently complete, not stopping short at the initial proclamation of the Christian mystery such as reflected in the kerygma.
4. It must be an integral Christian initiation, open to all the other factors of Christian life.

How to Choose Catechetical Textbooks, page 5

Systematic catechesis includes and develops the four essential dimensions of catechesis as expressed in NCD #39, #227, and #215, and in CCC #6: to proclaim Christ’s **message**; to lead people to **worship** and prayer; which develops and maintains **community** which can motivate and support people in their **service** to the world on behalf of the Reign of God. When these four essential elements are woven together in a consistent and organic formation program (known as religious education) we move forward in accomplishing the definitive aim of any religious education environment.

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FOUNDATIONAL PRINCIPLE: CATECHESIS EXAMINED, CONT'D

This definitive *aim* of catechesis is defined by the *General Directory of Catechesis* as **“to put people not only in touch, but also in communion and intimacy, with Jesus Christ.** All evangelizing activity is understood as promoting communion with Jesus Christ. Starting with the ‘initial’ conversion of a person to the Lord, moved by the Holy Spirit through the primary proclamation of the Gospel, catechesis seeks to solidify and mature this first adherence.”

GDC 80-81

The *General Directory for Catechesis* goes on to identify six specific tasks which are required to accomplish the goal of bringing people to Christ in a healthy and mature fashion according to their age and ability.

“Promote knowledge of faith... Catechesis must lead to ‘the gradual grasping of the whole truth about the divine plan’ by introducing the disciples of Jesus to a knowledge of Tradition and Scripture... By deepening knowledge of the faith, catechesis nourishes not only the life of faith but equips it to explain itself to the world.”

“Liturgical Education... Catechesis, along with promoting a knowledge of the meaning of our liturgy and the sacraments, must also educate ‘for prayer, thanksgiving, repentance, community spirit, for understanding correctly the meaning of the creeds,’ as all of this is necessary for a true liturgical life.” This enables the faithful to participate fully, consciously and actively in liturgical and sacramental life.

“Moral Formation... Conversion to Jesus Christ implies walking in his footsteps. Catechesis must, therefore, transmit to the disciples the attitudes of the Master himself... Evangelization, which involves the proclamation and presentation of morality, displays all the force of its appeal where it offers not only the proclaimed word but the lived word too. This moral testimony, which is prepared for by catechesis, must always demonstrate the social consequences of the demands of the Gospel.”

“Teaching to Pray... Communion with Jesus Christ leads disciples to assume the attitude of prayer and contemplation that the Master himself had... When catechesis is permeated by a climate of prayer, the assimilation of the entire Christian life reaches its summit.”

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FOUNDATIONAL PRINCIPLE: CATECHESIS EXAMINED, CONT'D

“Education for Community Life... Catechesis prepares the Christian to live in community and to participate actively in the life and mission of the Church... Christian community life is not realized spontaneously. It is necessary to educate it carefully.”

“Missionary Initiation... This ‘task’ seeks to equip Christians to be present in society through their professional, cultural and social lives. It also prepares them to lend their cooperation to the different ecclesial services, according to their proper vocation...to expect no other reward than the joy of working for the Kingdom. In educating for this missionary sense, catechesis is also necessary for interreligious dialogue, if it renders the faithful capable of meaningful communication with men and women of other religions.”

GDC 84-86

The *GDC* continues by making the following observations about the **tasks** of catechesis.

“...All of these tasks are necessary. As the vitality of the human body depends on the proper function of all its organs, so also the maturation of the Christian life requires that it is cultivated in all its dimensions... **When catechesis omits one of these elements, the Christian faith does not attain full development...**”

“These tasks are interdependent and develop together... Each great catechetical theme has a cognitive dimension as well as moral implications. It is interiorized in prayer and appropriated in witness... To fulfill its tasks, **catechesis avails of two principle means: transmission of the Gospel message and experience of the Christian life...**”

“Every dimension of the faith, like the faith itself as a whole, must be rooted in human experience and not remain a mere adjunct to the human person. Knowledge of the faith is significant. It gives light to the whole of existence and dialogues with culture...”

“...It is very important that catechesis retain the richness of these various aspects in such a way that one aspect is not separated from the rest to the detriment of the others.”

GDC 87

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PRELIMINARY CONSIDERATIONS

Religious education is the responsibility of the entire parish community; this fact keeps the selection of a text series in its proper perspective. Texts do not educate children and youth, people do. It is the life of the community of faith which shapes the religious experience of our younger members. If this principle is not appreciated, some may come to believe that the religious education program is solely responsible for the formation of our younger members, as well as the adults. This mistaken belief places too much of the burden of formation on one aspect of parish life and may lead to an exaggeration of the importance of texts in the whole process.

This consideration of the nature of catechesis provides an important foundation for reviewing the role of textbooks in a religious education program and for the more specific task of beginning the process to change the texts the parish is currently using. The following “big issue” questions relate to **the whole community’s responsibility to foster growth in faith** and are intended to assist religious education leaders in considering this issue. These questions address deep underlying educational issues and assumptions and it is recommended they be considered prior to initiating any process for reviewing and selecting catechetical textbooks.

1. What is the **parish community** currently teaching by its lifestyle? How does the parish welcome and extend hospitality? Is the worship experience vibrant and life giving? How does the parish serve the needs of its members as well as those within its geographical boundaries and beyond?
2. How are **parents**, as the first and foremost teachers of their children, supported in their unique role as parents and also consulted and invited to be involved in the planning and implementation of the parish catechetical programs?
3. How are **catechists** recruited, trained, supported and evaluated?
4. What particular **needs, strengths, and issues** are identified for the religious education program?
5. What are **parish leaders** teaching by their attitudes and actions regarding shared decision-making? How does the parish staff invite adults to be involved in parish ministry? How do parish leaders themselves support and participate in ongoing educational and formational programs?
6. What **group or representative board** exists in the parish to guide the overall planning and coordination of an integrated, comprehensive and systematic approach to catechesis?

Consideration of these questions may offer significant insight for future directions to an effective catechetical program.

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THE PURPOSE OF TEXTBOOKS

Catechetical textbooks and support materials are useful and important components of a comprehensive religious education program. The Bishops of the United States refer to textbooks as “guides for learning, summary statements of course content, and ready instruments of review” (NCD #264). Textbooks must never be equated with the religious education program in its entirety.

Textbooks and their components are useful tools. In fact, a catechetical series is more like a tool chest containing a series of tools that support a range of activity within the catechetical program.

An entire religion series is the tool of the parish leadership (scope and sequence)

The manual is the primary tool of the catechist.

The text itself is the tool of the student.

Catechesis is a multifaceted activity. The text is only one of the tools used within the religious education program. As any artisan knows, a good tool makes the crafting task easier. But tools, to be effective, need to be used by a knowledgeable and skilled artisan. In this case, the artisan is the catechist who is properly motivated and prepared to use the tool - the textbook manual - skillfully.

CHOOSING A TEXTBOOK SERIES

Since the history and development of each parish is unique, there is no single text series that is best for every parish program. Catechetical leaders must ask certain basic questions when choosing a textbook series. These questions focus on the systematic program of catechesis concerning goals, objectives, facilities and time frame.

1. What are the general program goals and specific grade level objectives which give direction to the overall religious education curriculum and which respond to the developmental stages and readiness levels of the participants (cf. NCD #221, #222)?
2. What facilities and settings are used to implement and enhance the catechetical programs?

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CHOOSING A TEXTBOOK SERIES, CONT'D

3. When is the catechetical program scheduled? How does the timing maximize the integration of the program into the total life of the parish as well as respond to the time pressures and schedules of the participants?

In reflecting upon these questions, consider the following basic principles:

Only change a text series if there is a substantial reason to do so!

When a text series is changed, all of the catechists are returned to a position of having to start all over again. The text series that are published by the major Catholic publishing houses are all doctrinally sound carrying the Nihil Obstat and Imprimatur (if the series does not have these - this is a good reason to change texts). While these series vary widely in teaching style, they all convey the basics of the faith. While there are valid reasons to change a series, make sure that they are worth all the extra work that must be assumed by the catechists.

Use only one text series in the elementary grades.

Text series are designed through the development of a Scope and Sequence. This scope and sequence indicates when a concept is to be both introduced and reinforced over the course of several years. By switching text series from one grade to another you make it very likely that either some information will never be introduced or that the information will never be reinforced properly. Catechist preference is not a valid reason to mix texts of different series in an elementary program.

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A PROCESS FOR SELECTING TEXTBOOKS

The overall catechetical program will be enhanced if a textbook selection committee is established. The committee could consist of the Religious Education Leader, the Youth Minister (if there is one), members of the parish religious education board, representative catechists and parents, and in older grades, some students. It is important for the committee to spend some time getting to know each other, coming to understand the vision of the parish religious education program, and praying together. It is also important for the committee to understand the context for selecting catechetical textbooks by reading the materials and discussing the questions posed earlier in this section. Once these questions have been considered and discussed, the committee would then examine samples of various texts and related materials and determine which resources will best serve the needs of those in the parish catechetical program.

PROCESS

1. After reading and discussing the background information, the following are some appropriate initial discussion questions:

How long has the current textbook series been in use?

To what degree is the religious education leader dissatisfied with the current textbook series? What are his/her reasons for continuing use or changing series?

To what degree are the catechists dissatisfied with the current manual/textbook?

What are their reasons?

To what degree are the students and parents satisfied with the student textbook?

What are their reasons?

2. Group members make recommendations to the religious education leader.
3. Recommendations are shared with the pastor and a decision made collaboratively between the religious education leader and pastor.
4. Be sure to review the Diocesan guide sheet to *Approved Text Series for the Diocese of Erie*

ELEMENTS OF METHODOLOGY FROM THE GDC

Diversity of methods in catechesis: (# 148)

The Church, in transmitting faith, does not have a particular method or any single method... Many charisms of service of the word have given rise to various methodological directions. Hence, the “variety of methods is a sign of life and richness” as well as a demonstration of respect for those to whom catechesis is addressed.

The content-method relationship in catechesis: (# 149)

The principle of “fidelity to God and fidelity to man” leads to an avoidance of any opposition or artificial separation or presumed neutrality between method and content. It affirms, rather, their necessary correlation and interaction. The catechist recognizes that method is at the service of revelation and conversion and that therefore it is necessary to make use of it. The catechist knows that the content of catechesis cannot be indifferently subjected to any method. It requires a process of transmission which is adequate to the nature of the message, to its sources and language, to the concrete circumstances of ecclesial communities as well as to the particular circumstances of the faithful to whom catechesis is addressed.

Inductive and deductive method: (#150-151)

The communication of the faith in catechesis is an event of grace, realized in the encounter of the Word of God with the experience of the person. It can happen in diverse ways, not always completely known to us. with regard to the history of catechesis, there is common reference today to inductive method and deductive method. Inductive method consists of presenting facts (biblical events, liturgical acts, events in the Church’s life as well as events from daily life) so as to discern the meaning these might have in divine Revelation. It is a method, which has many advantages, because it conforms to the characteristics of knowledge of the faith, which is knowledge by means of signs. The inductive method does not exclude deductive method. Indeed it requires the deductive method which explains and describes facts by proceeding from their causes. The deductive synthesis, however, has full value, only when the inductive process is completed.

In other words... The inductive method has the students engage in activities designed to whet their interest, elicit their reactions, and lead them to raise questions. It begins with questioning. The teacher then helps the students to pull their data together so some guidelines are established for further inquiry. A sense of direction for what is to happen next is then established. Finally the students close in on key discoveries. The result is a clear statement of point, principle, proposition or main conclusion. The students are discovering for themselves an important and meaningful aspect of knowledge.

ELEMENTS OF METHODOLOGY FROM THE GDC, CONT'D

When using the deductive method, on the other hand, the teacher outlines a point, principle, hypothesis, or position. It is clearly stated in the beginning. The teacher begins with **telling**. The students can then explore examples of the point or the key idea. Then the main idea examined must somehow be applied to the life experience of the students. In this stage, the students “deduct” that they have indeed been working on something that is relevant and applicable to life. From Methods 1 Course, Diocese of Erie

Human experience in catechesis: (# 152-153)

Experience has different functions in catechesis. For this reason, it must be continuously and duly evaluated.... It is a task of catechesis to make people more aware of their most basic experiences, to help them judge in the light of the Gospel the questions and needs that spring from them, as well as to educate them to a new way of life. Thus, the person becomes capable of behaving in a responsible and active way before the gift of God.

...Interpreting and illuminating experience with the data of faith is a constant task of catechetical pedagogy - even if with difficulty. It is a task that cannot be overlooked without falling into artificial juxtapositions or closed understandings of the truth. It is made possible, however, by a correct application of the correlation and interaction between profound human experiences and the revealed message. It is this, which has amply borne witness to the proclamation of the prophets, the preaching of Jesus, the teaching of the Apostles, which constitutes the basic normative criterion for every encounter of faith and human experience in the time of the Church.

Memorization in catechesis: (# 154-155)

Catechetics forms part of that “memory” of the Church, which vividly maintains the presence of the Lord among us. Use of memory, therefore, forms a constitutive aspect of the pedagogy of the faith since the beginning of Christianity. To overcome the risk of a mechanical memorization, mnemonic learning should be harmoniously inserted into the different functions of learning, such as spontaneous reaction and reflection, moments of dialogue and of silence and the relationship between oral and written work.

...Secure possession of the language of the faith is an indispensable condition for living that same faith. Such formulae, however, should be proposed as synthesis after a process of explanation and should be faithful to the Christian message.

...What is essential is that texts that are memorized must at the same time be taken in and gradually understood in depth, in order to become a source of Christian life on the personal level and on the community level.