

Family -- The Missing Piece in Catechesis

by Joseph D. White, Ph.D.

Family is Key to the Most Basic “Mysteries of Faith”

- God and Church are revealed as family.
- Family is a sign and image of the Trinity (CCC, 2205; Gen. 1:26-27)
- Christ’s relationship with the Church revealed as a marriage (Eph. 5, Rev.)
- God reveals himself as parent; fellow Christians as brothers and sisters
- “...Parents receive the responsibility and privilege of evangelizing their children. Parents should initiate their children at an early age into the mysteries of faith of which they are the first ‘heralds’ for their children” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2225).

Some Words about the Family

- “As the family goes, so goes society, and so goes the world in which we live.” – Pope John Paul II
- We could just as easily say, “As the family goes, so goes the parish, and so goes the Church in which we live” – for our parishes are made up of families, and every child with a vocation to the priesthood and religious life is born within a family.
- “The family...is the cradle of life and of every vocation” (Pope Benedict, Angelus talk, February 4, 2007).
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#1: WELCOME FAMILIES, AND MEET THEM WHERE THEY ARE

- Some challenges of working with families today
- Hectic schedules and divided attention
- University of Michigan study – in recent decades 33% decrease in families eating dinner together, 28% drop in family vacations. 100% increase in time children spend in structured sports, and 500% increase in passive spectator leisure time.
- Recent study by Annenberg Center for the Digital Future at the University of Southern California showed that 28% of Americans say they are spending less time with their families than in the previous year and this rise appears to be related to more time on digital media, such as Facebook, Twitter, and Internet websites.
- Increasing secularization of modern society
- Many adults poorly formed in their own faith, and some have little attachment to their faith. (53% of US adults have left the faith of their childhood at some point; 9% leave and return).
- Each challenge also provides opportunities, but to take advantage of these opportunities, we must sometimes let go of our judgments and expectations.

- We must be flexible, providing families with a variety of ways to plug into faith formation offerings
- We must also be good listeners
- Many families are experiencing, or have experienced, times of struggle or crisis
- Getting to know each family and their story helps us to meet their needs as Christ would.
- If possible, prior to first session of RE, get some basic information about the children in your group and their families.
- Reach out to the families you will be serving, either by email or snail mail
- Prior to each session, prepare an activity children can self-initiate as they come in, so you can greet each family
- Be understanding regarding special circumstances.

#2: CONNECT FAITH WITH FAMILY LIFE

- Helping Families Make Connections
 - God reveals himself to us as a parent, and we are his children (Galatians 3:26).
 - Because we are created in God's own image and likeness, our parent-child relationships are an image of God's relationship with us. This is one of the keys to discovering the spirituality of parenthood.
 - Catechists can give a great gift to families by helping them discover the connections already present between their faith and their family life.
- The Family Meal – Spiritual Benefits
 - Jesus chose a meal as the context within which he gave (and continues to give) his whole self to us.
 - Just as we gather with our earthly families and share meals together, we are called to share the meal of the Eucharist with our spiritual family, the Church.
 - We are united in a special way with Christ and with one another through this meal. We gather together for meals with family and friends because of the love we have and the fellowship we share with them.
 - The meals we share with our families serve to draw us closer to one another.
- The Family Meal – Practical Benefits
 - Columbia University study in 2012 found children and teens who regularly eat with their families (5-7x per week vs. 2 or fewer)
 - have lower levels of tension and stress at home
 - are happier and have better peer relationships
 - get better grades in school
 - are more likely to confide in their parents
 - have healthier eating habits
 - have a lower risk of suicide
 - have a much lower risk of substance abuse.
- Catechists and leaders can serve an important role by helping families appreciate the value of the family meal, its connection to our faith, and the ways in which it can draw us closer together.

Works of Mercy -- God reveals himself in family life

Other family moments

- We can help families connect faith with other daily moments in the lives of their families by giving them tools for everyday interactions, such as:
 - car time
 - bedtime
 - seasonal celebrations

#3: BUILD COMMUNITY

- Created for Community
- Foundational mystery of our faith: God is a Trinity
- Made in God's image, we are created to be in communion with others.
- Jesus sent his disciples out two-by-two, and promised, "where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them" (Matthew 18:20).
- Education for community life is one of the 6 essential tasks of catechesis mentioned in the *General Directory for Catechesis*: "Catechesis prepares the Christian to live in community and to participate actively in the life and mission of the Church" (*GDC*, 86).
- Families today often find it a challenge to come together, due to busy schedules, conflicting priorities, and other practical issues.
- But making connections with our parish family is an essential aspect of what it means to be Catholic. Ours is not a solitary tradition of only an individual, personal relationship with God, but also a communal one, in which we celebrate and pray together as brothers and sisters.
- "We should not stay away from our assembly, as is the custom of some, but encourage one another" (Hebrews 10:25).
- Facilitating connections and building community among our families is one way we can help our families to appreciate the value of togetherness and build relationships that will last for years to come.
- Communicate on an ongoing basis with parents – in person when possible, as well as through email, newsletters and/or social media.
- Consider hosting some sessions for parents and children together, so parents can experience sessions for themselves and are better able to reinforce the lessons at home.
- If possible, arrange some optional meetings for families outside of the regular sessions. Family potluck dinners, class plays, or attending a family movie as a group can be great ways to build community among the families in your group.

#4: STRUCTURE CATECHETICAL MINISTRY WITH FAMILIES IN MIND

- Developmental Stages of Family Life
 - The importance of Early Childhood Faith Formation
 - Family restructuring
 - The "God gene" and attachment
 - Teen years

- Structuring Catechetical Ministry for Parent Involvement
- Make the Expectation Clear
- Give a Variety of Opportunities
- *Catechetical Assistant*
- *Special Events Team*
- *Parish Ministry Liaison*
- *Special Project Volunteer*
- *Prayer Volunteer*
- *Adult Faith Formation*
- Be understanding

TIPS FOR CATECHISTS:

- Consider the needs of the families to whom you minister, based on their stage in the family life cycle.
- Assist preschool families in structuring a community and building foundations of faith in the home.
- Families of children in elementary school will benefit from opportunities to be involved in some capacity, as well as ways to reinforce lessons at home.
- Families of teens may seek support and connection with other parents of adolescents, as well as information on strategies for communication and problem-solving with their teens.
- Evaluate adult faith formation opportunities.

#5: HELP FAMILIES EVANGELIZE

- “So shall my word be that goes forth from my mouth; It shall not return to me empty, but shall do what pleases me, achieving the end for which I sent it” (Isaiah 55:11).
- Intentional discipleship = life in mission.
- word and action
 - family
 - parish
 - community
 - poor and vulnerable
- As we allow the Holy Spirit to transform our lives, we discover God’s call and we recognize and use the gifts God has given us.
- Missionary initiation: 1 of the 6 fundamental tasks of catechesis (*GDC*, 86).
- Every baptized person is called to share Christ with others through word and action
- The call to evangelization: directed towards us as individuals, towards the entire Church, and also towards our families – the domestic Church.
- Parents are called to be evangelizers of their children as they serve as “first heralds” of the Gospel (*CCC*, 2225).
- Children, too, learn to be missionaries as they share what they are learning with family members and others, and as they strive to be examples to peers and younger brothers and sisters.

#5: HELP FAMILIES EVANGELIZE

Catechists can assist families in answering the call to evangelization by:
preparing children to articulate their faith to others.
helping learners live the message they have received
assisting parents in talking with their children about the faith.
giving families practical ways to live the faith in their daily lives.

TIPS FOR CATECHISTS:

1. Make the key concept the password.
2. Provide parents with developmental information about how children this age understand the lesson concept.
3. Give parents “ask me” questions.
4. Provide simple, practical guides for families on social justice practices.
5. Offer families opportunities to participate in service projects.

Let us pray...

Gracious God, you reveal yourself to us as a communion of persons, and you use the family to teach us about how you relate to us and how we should think of one another. Help us to value your gift of family. Guide us as we welcome families, and bless all the families in our community. Teach us, through your grace, to live out your plan for our families. We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen