

## In Support of Catechetical Ministry

*A Statement from the National Conference of Catholic Bishops*

### Abbreviations

ACCC	<i>Adult Catechesis in the Christian Community: Some Principles and Guidelines</i>
CCC	<i>Catechism of the Catholic Church</i>
CT	<i>On Catechesis in Our Time (Catechesis Tradendae)</i>
DV	<i>Constitution on Divine Revelation (Dei Verbum)</i>
EN	<i>On Evangelization in the Modern World (Evangelii Nuntiandi)</i>
GC	<i>Guide for Catechists</i>
GDC	<i>General Directory for Catechesis</i>
GS	<i>Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (Gaudium et Spes)</i>
RCIA	<i>Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults</i>
RM	<i>On the Permanent Validity of the Church's Missionary Mandate (Redemptoris Missio)</i>

### Introduction

We the bishops of the United States, mindful of our role as chief catechists, write on the occasion of this new millennium and on the sixty-fifth anniversary (September 17, 2000) of the Vatican's establishment of Catechetical Sunday to recommit ourselves to the development and support of catechetical ministry.

We write on this occasion, not only to remember what has been accomplished through this essential ministry of the Church and to celebrate the present, but also to look with firm faith to the future. In our roles as chief catechists, we affirm all that is good in catechetical ministry, commit ourselves to strengthening that which is weak, and look forward to developing effective ways to reach all those who are in need of God's saving Word.

Because catechesis is a responsibility of the entire faith community (GDC, no. 220), this mission of the Church is entrusted to every baptized Catholic. Some—bishops, priests, and deacons—exercise catechetical ministry by ordination. Others participate in this responsibility through a commissioning to carry out a specific catechetical activity. We ask you to read this statement and to affirm and pray for those in your parishes and communities of faith who have particular responsibilities for this ministry, especially pastors and those who work with them, directors of religious education, parish catechists, principals, Catholic school teachers, youth ministers, RCIA team members, and all those who catechize in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ.

In this statement, we begin by offering a brief observation on the context in which catechesis occurs today. Then, we remember those events and people who have brought us this far in faith. Next, we celebrate the gifts we have been given in this ministry and the many people who make catechesis a reality. In addition, we note our beliefs about the ministry of catechesis. Finally, we recommit ourselves in support of catechetical ministry.

### **Context of Catechesis**

"The Church continues to sow the Gospel in God's field" (GDC, no. 16). The soil of culture into which the seeds of faith are planted today is far different from the culture that existed when the first Catechetical Sunday was celebrated. For us in the United States, our culture offers significant challenges that influence how the Gospel is proclaimed. We live in an increasingly secular and materialistic society, which is often at odds with our Christian messages and values. The disintegration of the community and social structures that once supported religious faith and encouraged family life have been replaced by a media- and technology-driven culture that makes catechesis especially difficult. Religious instruction and catechesis compete against entertainment and sports for time in people's busy lives.

At the same time, we live in a country that prizes education, has access to countless resources, encourages people to get involved in community efforts, and is obviously seeking to feed its spiritual hungers.

Catechists today face the difficult task of proclaiming the good news of Christ Jesus in such a way that it will be heard, accepted, and authentically understood in this culture. They must reach out to those who are unevangelized and uncatechized, as well as work with the large numbers of people today who have not been fully catechized. We write to offer our support to those involved in this challenging ministry.

### **We Remember**

*"The effectiveness of catechesis is and always will be a gift of God, through the operation of the Spirit of the Father and the Son"* (GDC, no. 288).

In catechesis, it is God who initiates the gift, and it is through God's grace that we are able to respond. Catechesis is a remembering "which vividly maintains the presence of the Lord among us" (GDC, no. 154). We recall with gratitude the developments in the catechetical ministry that have indeed maintained the Lord's presence among us and faithfully preserved the living tradition of the Catholic Church.

"Catechesis is nothing other than the process of transmitting the Gospel, as the Christian community has received it, understands it, celebrates it, lives it and communicates it in many ways" (GDC, no. 105). It is an awesome task, one that deserves complete dedication, catechists who are well formed in faith, financial resources, and the finest of materials. While all ministries require support, we know that by strengthening the catechetical ministry we also strengthen the Church's internal life as a community of believers and her external activity as a missionary

church (CT, no. 15).

We remember and give thanks for all those who have embraced the mission of catechesis throughout the ages. Through their efforts, Catholic faith has been handed on from generation to generation; we remember particularly those who catechized us, especially our parents and our families. In addition, we remember our ancestors in faith: the saints and martyrs whose lives continue to inspire our faith, and those countless women and men who gave of themselves as catechists so that others might believe. We join Pope John Paul II in stressing "the importance and relevance of the work of catechists as a *'fundamental evangelical service'*" (GC, no. 1). In this country, as in the world, "The value of catechists and their influence on the apostolate are always decisive for the Church's mission" (GC, no. 5).

We remember that "catechesis is intimately bound up with the whole of the Church's life" (CT, no. 13), and we know that the most effective catechesis is integrated with liturgy, sacraments, and works of justice and charity.

In a time when excessive individualism threatens the fabric of community life, we remember that catechesis is an ecclesial activity accomplished by, with, and for the community of faith. Our experience tells us that the most effective catechesis builds upon the foundation provided by vitally alive parish communities. We make our own the statement from the *General Directory for Catechesis* that, "The parish is, without doubt, the most important locus in which the Christian community is formed and expressed" (no. 257).

We remember with gratitude all that has happened in and through the ministry of catechesis in the past. Our memories give cause to celebrate that which is now taking place in catechesis.

### **We Celebrate**

*"Thus from celebration to celebration, as they proclaim the Paschal mystery of Jesus 'until he comes,' the pilgrim People of God advances, 'following the narrow way of the cross,' toward the heavenly banquet, when all the elect will be seated at the table of the kingdom"* (CCC, no. 1344).

In 1935, the Holy See's Congregation of the Council announced the first Catechetical day: "In order that the minds of the Christian people may be directed to religious instruction, let a Catechetical Day be established in each parish, if this has not already been done. On this day, let the Feast of Christian Doctrine be celebrated with as much solemnity as possible."

On this anniversary, we celebrate the wonderful gift of Christian doctrine, the sacred deposit of our faith (CCC, no. 84). We celebrate with renewed gratitude God's revelation in Sacred Scripture, which "is the speech of God as it is put down in writing under the breath of the Holy Spirit" (CCC, no. 81; DV, no. 9). We equally and gratefully celebrate God's revelation in Sacred Tradition through which "the Church, in her doctrine, life, and worship perpetuates and transmits to every generation all that she herself is, all that she believes" (CCC, no. 78; DV, no. 8).

On this occasion, we celebrate that the Church "exists in order to evangelize" (EN, no. 14). It is only through the proclamation of the good news of Jesus Christ that the hungers of people's

hearts are satisfied. We celebrate our Holy Father's call to a new evangelization and the Church's response to teach and witness the faith in areas where "entire groups of the baptized have lost a living sense of the faith" (GDC, no. 58c; RM, no. 33d).

We celebrate the vision of harmony for catechesis formed by the documents of the Second Vatican Council, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, and the *General Directory for Catechesis*. Together, these documents of the Universal Church provide catechists and the community of faith with a spirit of renewed mission, with a "sure norm for teaching the faith" (CCC, no. 3), and with "theologico-pastoral principles" for "better orienting and coordinating" catechesis (GDC, no. 9). The simultaneous availability of these rich resources makes this a privileged moment for the ministry of catechesis.

We celebrate the echo of this catechetical harmony in the local churches and parishes. When catechesis calls people to discipleship, they more readily take on the mission of the Church in all areas of their lives. "If catechesis is done well, Christians will be eager to bear witness to their faith, to hand it on to their children, to make it known to others, and to serve the human community in every way" (CT, no. 24).

We celebrate all that the Church has gained from the rich diversity of people's cultures. Each community's unique expression of the faith enriches the faith of the whole Church. We celebrate the catechesis done in people's original language of faith and the ways in which gifted catechists have incorporated the religious devotions and traditions with which a culture binds its people to God. We celebrate the expressions of faith made through the arts. The incorporation of such artistic images, music, song, and performance in catechesis provides further avenues to touch the heart and spirit of the human person with the Word of God.

Because effective catechesis depends so heavily on human effort—on professional preparation, planning, performance, and evaluation; on personal qualities and commitments; and especially on the faith, hope, and love of catechists—we celebrate and express our deepest gratitude for the many thousands of persons who serve the Church as catechists. Through their personal efforts at evangelization, they plant the seeds of faith in people of all ages throughout the United States. We are aware of the efforts catechists make to be faithful instruments of God's Word and the personal sacrifices they make to teach in the name of Christ and his Church; we give thanks to God for their efforts.

That which we celebrate today leads us, in turn, to reflect on the faith we hold and on the needs for catechesis in the future.

## **We Believe**

*"The Holy Spirit will come and we shall know him; he will be with us for ever; he will remain with us. The Spirit will teach us everything, remind us of all that Christ said to us and bear witness to him. The Holy Spirit will lead us into all truth and will glorify Christ"* (CCC, no. 729).

We believe that faith is to be "believed, celebrated, lived and prayed. It is a call to integral Christian education" (GDC, no. 122). The "symphony of faith" to which the *Catechism* refers

must be reflected in catechesis. The voices of all catechists must echo together the one Word; if catechesis is to be truly integrated, the voices of catechists must blend with the voices of bishops, pastors, and all others engaged in pastoral ministry.

We believe that the development of faith "involve[s] a process of inculturation if the Gospel is to take flesh in each people's culture" (CCC, no. 854). We are mindful of the diversities in our local churches and parish communities. Racial and cultural diversity is a reality, and at times our response to the corresponding needs in faith formation has been less than adequate. At the same time, "the power of the Gospel everywhere transforms and regenerates. When that power enters a culture, it is no surprise that it rectifies many of its elements. There would be no catechesis if it were the Gospel that had to change when it came in contact with the cultures" (CT, no. 53).

We believe that catechesis proclaims the binding gospel values that exist for all Catholics. These values are planted at baptism and nurtured through all the stages of catechesis. The development of these Catholic norms and values depends on continuity and a deepening spiral of understanding as a person matures.

We believe that catechesis proclaims the unity of the Church. Wherever catechesis takes place and whoever is called to catechize, "all these catechetical channels should really converge on the same confession of faith, on the same membership of the Church, and on commitments in society lived in the same Gospel spirit: 'one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father'" (CT, no. 67).

We believe the primacy of adult catechetical efforts must be kept in the forefront, acknowledging that there are many adults who need to be reconnected with the substance of Catholic teaching. "A fully Christian community can exist only when a systematic catechesis of all its members takes place and when an effective and well-developed catechesis of adults is regarded as the *central task* of the catechetical enterprise" (ACCC, no. 25).

We believe that the Church is to be "the soul of human society in its renewal by Christ and transformation into the family of God" (GS, no. 40). We must keep in our minds, in our hearts, and in our catechizing, not only communion within the Church, but the mandate of Jesus and the perennial and constant challenge to reach the world with the Gospel. We believe that we must employ contemporary media and technology to accomplish our mission.

We believe that the ministry of catechesis is "a work of the Holy Spirit, a work that he alone can initiate and sustain" (CT, no. 72). Knowing that we cannot accomplish the mission of catechesis alone, we bishops depend on the generosity of our catechetical leadership and catechists. We affirm that "lay catechists should be *recognized, respected and loved* by their priests and communities. They should be supported in their formation and encouraged and helped to accomplish a task which is indispensable but far from easy. Theirs is a genuine service through which God in Christ continues His work of mercy and salvation in the world" (ACCC, no. 76).

These convictions lead us to recommit ourselves to action that will strengthen the Church's catechetical efforts.

## We Commit Ourselves

"'Among the principal duties of Bishops, that of preaching the Gospel excels.' In carrying out this task, Bishops are, above all, 'heralds of the faith,' seeking new disciples for Jesus Christ, and 'authentic teachers,' transmitting the faith to be professed and lived to those entrusted to their care" (GDC, no. 222).

As teachers of the faith, we are called to offer direction and visible support to the work of catechesis. We will continue to do the following:

- Exercise the leadership in catechesis for which we have been graced by reason of our office
- Minister side by side with catechetical leaders and catechists in all arenas so that it is clear to all that catechetical ministers work together with the bishop
- Work to support our pastors in their efforts to provide catechesis at the parish level (We call on them to bring forth from the parish community men and women of faith, well prepared to serve the Church in the ministry of catechist.)

Through our diocesan catechetical offices, we commit ourselves to providing formation for catechetical leaders and catechists for all age levels so that they can serve the Church competently. For catechesis to be effective, 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" (CT, no. 15). We commit ourselves to continue to provide these resources. Through a variety of programs and opportunities, we will ensure the formation of catechists in their own spirituality, in their understanding of and appreciation for the faith, in their understanding of those with whom they work, and in the development of skills needed for effective communication. Making better use of contemporary media and technology is important in this effort.

We commit ourselves to ensure that in formation programs for priests, deacons, seminarians, lay ministers, and catechists, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, the *General Directory for Catechesis*, and the Church's other catechetical documents are studied and provide guidance to our catechetical efforts. Only with a common vision and a clear understanding of the Church's direction for catechesis can those who serve together in this mission orchestrate a "symphony of faith" for those to be catechized.

We commit ourselves to fulfill our responsibility as teachers of the faith by continuing to assure that the doctrinal content of catechetical materials is both faithful to the teaching of the Church and complete in its expression. This safeguarding, based on the *Catechism*, also helps to promote a common language of faith essential to the life of the Church.

Finally, because the need for well-prepared catechists is so great, we will work to call forth and recruit qualified people to this vital ministry. The nurture we offer our current catechists will

contribute to this effort: "a fulfilled, responsible and dynamic catechist, working enthusiastically and joyfully in the tasks assigned appreciated and properly remunerated, is the best promoter of other vocations" (GC, no. 17).

## Conclusion

As we enter this third millennium conscious of who we are and of our call to manifest our faith, we can draw enormous support from one another in our common catechetical efforts. This is a new moment for catechesis in our country. The catechetical effort today is clearly an expression of the new evangelization. We know as bishops that we do not address this renewal alone—a whole range of catechetical leadership is engaged in this effort. Some by ordination, others by commissioning, have leadership roles, but all by virtue of baptism have an obligation to spread the faith and to do so in a unified and collaborative manner. We live in an age of hope. This is not a groundless euphoria but a confidence that God continues to grace the Church with challenges that urge us to reach deep within our lived experience of Jesus to find the practical means to introduce a whole new generation into the knowledge of—indeed, into the encounter with—the living Jesus Christ.

## Resources

### Related Documents

The Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, Washington, D.C.: United States Catholic Conference, 1993.

Second Vatican Council, *Constitution on Divine Revelation (Dei Verbum)*, Washington, D.C.: United States Catholic Conference, 1965.

### The Catechetical Documents of Our Tradition

*From the Universal Church:*

*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd ed. Washington, D.C.: United States Catholic Conference, 2000.

Congregation for the Clergy, *General Directory for Catechesis*, Washington, D.C.: United States Catholic Conference, 1998.

Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples, *Guide for Catechists*, Washington, D.C.: United States Catholic Conference, 1993.

The Documents of the Second Vatican Council

International Commission on English in the Liturgy and Bishops' Committee on the Liturgy (National Conference of Catholic Bishops), *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults*, Washington, D.C.: United States Catholic Conference, 1988.

International Council for Catechesis, *Adult Catechesis in the Christian Community: Some Principles and Guidelines*, Washington, D.C.: United States Catholic Conference, 1992.  
John Paul II, *On Catechesis in Our Time (Catechesi Tradendae)*, Washington, D.C.: United States Catholic Conference, 1979.

*From the National Conference of Catholic Bishops/United States Catholic Conference:*  
National Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Our Hearts Were Burning Within Us: A Pastoral Plan for Adult Faith Formation*, Washington, D.C.: United States Catholic Conference, 1999.  
National Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Renewing the Vision: A Framework for Catholic Youth Ministry*, Washington, D.C.: United States Catholic Conference, 1997.  
National Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Sharing the Light of Faith: National Catechetical Directory for Catholics of the United States*, Washington, D.C.: United States Catholic Conference, 1979.  
National Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Sons and Daughters of the Light: A Pastoral Plan for Ministering to Young Adults*, Washington, D.C.: United States Catholic Conference, 1996.  
National Conference of Catholic Bishops, *To Teach as Jesus Did: A Pastoral Message on Catholic Education*, Washington, D.C.: United States Catholic Conference, 1972.  
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