

Becoming a Catechist

By Beatrice Cunningham

You have been called to become a catechist! What an awesome call and responsibility! You may be feeling very unprepared, but don't worry. God, who called you, will give you all you need to be a success. Maybe it was the Director of Religious Education, or your Pastor, who approached you and said, "Have you ever thought about becoming a catechist?" One of the first things that I had to realize as a catechist is that the call came from God. In a short time, I also realized that God, my Pastor, the DRE and the rest of my parish community would support me in this call.

The *General Directory for Catechesis* states that Catechesis is the responsibility of the entire faith community. This mission of the Church is entrusted to every baptized Catholic. The effectiveness of catechesis is and always will be a gift of God, through the operation of the Holy Spirit, the Father, and the Son. Think about those persons who helped you grow in faith. Remember how lovingly they proclaimed the Gospel, and by the way they lived their lives. Someone has already seen this in you. That is the reason you are being called to become a catechist.

"Catechesis is nothing other than the process of transmitting the Gospel, as the community has received it, understands it, celebrates it, lives it, and communicates it in many ways" (*GDC*, 105). This is an awesome task that needs well-formed catechists, adequate financial resources, and appropriate instructional materials.

Diocesan catechetical offices commit themselves to providing formation for catechists of all age levels so that they may serve the Church competently. The first and foremost role of a catechist is to know and love Christ, and the second is to lead others to him. The *Directory* puts it like this: "The christocentric purpose of catechesis, which emphasizes the communion of the convert with Jesus Christ, permeates all aspects of the formation of catechists. This aim is nothing other than to lead the catechist to know how to animate a catechetical journey of which, the necessary stages are: the proclamation of Jesus Christ; making known his life by setting it in the context of salvation history; explanation of the mystery of the Son of God, made man for us; and finally to help the catechumen, or those being catechized, to identify with Jesus Christ through the sacraments of initiation. With continuing catechesis, the catechist merely tries to deepen these basic elements." (*GDC* 235)

In short, your task is nothing less than to "know Christ and to make Christ known" To *know* Christ you must spend quality time in Scripture reading and prayer. Time spent in the presence of the Blessed Sacrament will nourish your own personal relationship with Christ. You should also take formation classes that are available to the catechist so that you may know how to teach only authentic Church teachings. As you respond to the ministerial call that comes from the Lord, you must be willing not only to catechize others, but also to engage in your own continued Christian formation. You should attend courses and workshops in the

diocese, as well as in-service opportunities offered by the parish to have sufficient knowledge of the message, the people, and the social context in which we live.

The sacraments are encounters with Christ, and if you want a deeper, closer, ever-growing relationship with Christ, you should receive them often. It is through the sacraments that we are nourished and strengthened for the journey. We get to know Christ better through each encounter, especially when we acknowledge our need to be forgiven through the Sacrament of Reconciliation. Let us as catechists also turn to the Blessed Virgin Mary, who saw her Son grow in wisdom, age, and grace, and ask her to intercede for us. Let us look to her for the spiritual model for carrying out and strengthening the renewal of all catechists in faith, hope, and love.

To make Christ *known* is the second part of the task of the catechist. Here we are called to be a witness, to tell our personal story of how we have come to know Christ and the power given to us through his resurrection. You must prepare lessons with age-appropriate materials that are sensitive to cultural differences and to the special needs of your students. The environment and atmosphere of each classroom should be positive. Catechists should always be available to greet the students as they come into the classroom.

St. Paul said, "...I have become all things to all people, that I might by all means save some." (1Cor 9:22) As catechists we must keep this in mind. The whole concern of doctrine and its teaching must be in relation to the love that never ends. Whether something is proposed for belief, for hope, or for action, the love of our Lord must always be made accessible. Jesus told us to "love one another as I have loved you." (Jn 15:12) The Catechism states: This love implies an effective offering of oneself, by his example." (CCC 459). This is our main purpose as catechists.

You have been called to a ministry of service through which Christ continues his work of mercy and salvation in the world. You are to go and spread the Good News of God's unconditional love. The U.S. Bishops wrote in their statement, *In Support of Catechetical Ministry*: "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. We encourage all to pray for them and for their ministry. Developing fulfilled, responsible, and dynamic catechists, working enthusiastically and joyfully in the tasks assigned to them, is the best way to promote other vocations (cf. *GC*, no. 17).

As you assist the next generation in getting to know Christ and helping them make Christ known to others, may you make the world a better place.