

CHAPTER ONE

What is sacramental catechesis?

The goal of *Embracing the Vision* is very simple: to help parishes lead children, youth, and adults to truly celebrate the sacraments, and in the course of this journey to inform, form, and transform them more deeply into the sacramental life of the Church.

We live in a great period of catechetical renewal. The *General Directory for Catechesis* (GDC) and the *National Directory for Catechesis* (NDC) have inspired us with new vision, challenges, and models for our catechetical ministry. Catechesis is an essential moment in the process of evangelization. The object of catechesis is communion with Jesus Christ. The baptismal catechumenate is the inspiration for all catechesis in the Church. Adult formation is the axis around which revolves catechesis for children, youth, and the elderly. Catechesis is lifelong, and it is the responsibility of the entire Christian community.

These are some of the major elements that permeate the catechetical vision of the Church. They are meant to transform every aspect of catechesis, including sacramental catechesis. We cannot be content with doing sacramental preparation the same way we have been doing it for years. Our programs must embrace this wonderful new vision of the Church.

Embracing the Vision incorporates all the principles listed above. At the heart of this program is a new evangelization that aims to deepen faith and conversion among those already baptized. The model for sacramental preparation used here is based on the baptismal catechumenate. The formation of adults is a fundamental component of the program, as parents and other adults in the community walk the journey with the children and youth who are preparing for First Reconciliation and First Communion. It is my firm belief that the

entire structure for sacramental preparation takes place within the context of the entire parish community.

Sacramental preparation is a very special time in the parish. It is also a special time in the lives of the faithful. We do our best to provide sacramental programs that form children, youth, and adults for the rest of their lives. For many families, these sacramental moments serve to enrich and deepen their faith. For others, they are turning points that have inspired them to more fully participate in the life of the Church.

Yet, in spite of our best efforts, sacramental moments can also be a time of tension and difficulty. Our sacramental programs may be informing children and families, but are they also forming and transforming them? We encounter families who are in great need of conversion. Parents bring children for sacramental preparation who have never been in religious education or go to Mass on Sunday themselves. We encounter parents who resist participation in sacramental programs because they interfere with sports or other extracurricular activities. And who among us has not experienced the reality of children who are not seen again in the parish after they have received their First Communion?

Unique Opportunities

All of these experiences, positive or negative, only serve to highlight the fact that sacramental moments offer us a unique opportunity to transform people's lives. We must seize the moment! The GDC recognizes this fact: "Certain situations and circumstances require special forms of catechesis" (#176). Catechesis

for sacraments is one of these circumstances because it is a time when "people are disposed more than ever to seek out the true meaning of life" (#176).

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The GDC also challenges us to embrace a new vision for sacramental catechesis. It is important that we begin now to embrace this vision. Why? Because leading people to sacraments and celebrating sacraments is one of the most important things we do as Church. Sacramental preparation is much more than one activity among many. It has priority over the many activities we do. The primacy of sacramental catechesis flows from the priority given to liturgy at the Second Vatican Council: "Still the liturgy is the

summit towards which the activity of the Church is directed; at the same time it is the fount from which all the Church's power flows" (*Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, 10).

What is the model we are called to embrace? It is the baptismal catechumenate. The GDC inspires us with this directive: "The model for all catechesis is the baptismal catechumenate, when, by specific formation, an adult converted to belief is brought to explicit profession of baptismal faith during the Paschal Vigil. This catechumenal formation should inspire other forms of catechesis in both their objectives and in their dynamism" (GDC, 59).

The model of the baptismal catechumenate is especially important for sacramental preparation as a special form of catechesis. It shows us the way to lead people to sacraments. It provides a blueprint for the journey. It makes us aware that our sacramental programs for the non-baptized, as well as for those who are already baptized, should not contradict one another. More importantly, the

baptismal catechumenate provides us with the fundamental objectives and dynamics for all sacramental preparation in the Church.

- Conversion, the formation and transformation of the person, is the preeminent goal of sacramental preparation;
- The context for all sacramental preparation is the community of believers.
- Liturgical prayer is the most powerful way we have of “forming” in the faith;
- The sacramental rites of the Church give us the first foundation for developing a comprehensive catechesis for sacramental preparation.

This resource thus uses the baptismal catechumenate as the model and inspiration for sacramental preparation. The process of sacramental catechesis as developed here is designed around the objectives and dynamics that are listed above.

Conversion is the Goal

I often hear catechists lament that families bring children to sacramental preparation and after the child receives the sacrament, they never see them again. Or, the children in sacramental preparation come to faith formation sessions but not to Mass. Rather than seeing these situations as obstacles to sacramental preparation, we need to view them as challenges. What exactly are we doing when we lead people to sacraments? What is the primary goal and focus of our programs? Better yet, are our programs feeding and nourishing people? Are they changing people’s lives?

The primary goal of sacramental preparation is conversion. Leading people to sacraments is about taking hold of this unique opportunity to inform, form, and transform their lives. It is not about teaching them everything the Church has ever taught—in case we may never see them again. The confusion of sacramental preparation with religious education can and

does result in an inordinate desire to do just that. This concern is not new to our own age. In 1957 a catechist made the following remarks about First Communion preparation: “Let those who have faith not be hasty lest the spiritual impulses of the child be satiated before they are unlocked. Our education suffers from ‘too early and too much.’ We anticipate constantly. We drag children towards God instead of letting them come . . ., and do not hinder them as the Gospel teaches us. We say ‘learn it now and do it now even if you do not desire it.’ Meanwhile we think that we risk nothing because we have done everything.”

What is unique about this journey toward the sacraments is that it leads to conversion, not to information so much as to formation. If we look at the baptismal catechumenate as our model, we see that leading people to sacraments is indeed an authentic journey of conversion. The *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults* (RCIA) tells us that the process is designed to enable people to “consciously and freely seek the living God and enter the way of faith and conversion as the Holy Spirit opens their hearts” (RCIA, 1). It is “suited to a spiritual journey” (RCIA, 5) and bears “a markedly paschal character” (RCIA, 8).

Any program for sacramental preparation for First Reconciliation and First Communion should embrace these same characteristics. They should be suited to a spiritual journey that leads children, youth, or adults to more deeply seek the living God and continue the way of faith and conversion that began with their baptism. Our catechesis should be such that the Holy Spirit is unleashed to open wide their hearts. Sacramental preparation leads them to embrace the Paschal Mystery in such a way that they are both formed and transformed by it.

The conversion of St. Paul is an excellent model for sacramental catechesis. Paul’s conversion did not happen because he read a book about Jesus or attended four classes. He was on a journey towards Damascus. He experienced a light, one so vibrant that it “flashed around him” (Acts 9:3). He fell to the

ground. He heard God calling his name and speaking to him. He was driven to ask “Who are you, Lord?” And from this encounter the Lord called him to get up from the ground and go to the city. Paul got up from the ground, and though his eyes were open he could not yet see and so was led by the hand by others. Artists often depict the conversion of St. Paul as an encounter with the Lord that was so powerful that Paul was knocked off his horse.

Our programs of sacramental preparation must be so powerful that they at least knock people off their feet. They must be so vibrant that people are led to respond fully to God who is calling them. They should animate people to continue their journey of faith after they have celebrated the sacrament. They should feed and nourish them in such a profound way that the result is an ever deeper participation in the life of the Church. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (CCC) wonderfully describes this process as initiating “people into the mystery of Christ” (CCC, 1075).

Let us consider for a moment the sacramental preparation for First Reconciliation. In remote catechesis (religious education) children learn about the sacrament. They are taught to memorize an Act of Contrition and learn what it means to be sorry. They learn about sin according to their age level and ability. They learn about the Ten Commandments and the Beatitudes. They are taught how to celebrate the rite of penance.

But this is not enough. We must also lead children to conversion; we must help them change their lives. We must provide them with an experience of the Lord much like the one that St. Paul had. Sacramental preparation is an intense and immediate period of time that allows children to hear the reconciling Jesus call their name. It is a time when they are led to respond, even in their tender years, to ask

“Who are you, Lord?” It is a time when we take them by the hand and lead them to realize that true sorrow (contrition) is what happens when you deeply experience God’s love. It is a time when we lead them to know that: confessing sin is not just naming an action, it is a failure against a genuine love of God and neighbor; penance is more than saying a prayer, it is how

we express through actions our conversion and resolve not to sin again; absolution not only grants pardon for sin but places us in the arms of the reconciling Jesus where we are made one with him, the Church, and one another. Preparing for the sacraments is a time for children to experience all of this.

When this preparation is done magnificently (and with the grace of God) the child will approach the sacrament for the first time, not with fear or trepidation, but with an aching desire to meet the reconciling Christ. Conversion catechesis instills in the child awareness that this first celebration is only the beginning of many more celebrations of the sacrament in their lives. It motivates them to want to celebrate the sacrament regularly in their lives. It also starts them on the path to live as a reconciling person in the world.

Not an Easy Task

Conversion catechesis is not easy. We can not accomplish it by mere instruction alone (GDC, 68). The baptismal catechumenate shows us that suitable formation includes an acquaintance with dogma, a profound sense of the mystery of salvation, liturgical prayer, a familiarity with the Christian way of life, and apostolic works (RCIA, 75.1,2,3,4). In other words, we don’t just hand catechumens a textbook and say, “Read it and learn it.” That’s not how disciples are formed.

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The GDC proclaims that the “living source of the word of God and the ‘sources deriving from it, and through which it is expressed,’ provide catechesis with those criteria for the transmission of its message to all who have made their decision to follow Jesus Christ” (GDC, 95).

Embracing the Vision makes use of all of the sources of catechesis: liturgy, scripture, doctrine, community, apostolic works, witness, and human society and culture.

None of these sources is used in a narrow sense. *Liturgical prayer* is used as the first formation for each catechetical session. It is also the source of catechesis where the symbols, gestures, and prayers for each sacrament serve as a primary means for catechesis. *Scripture* is proclaimed in the opening prayers where God’s living Word speaks to all who are present and is used as the opening reflection in each catechetical session. The Church’s *teaching* about reconciliation and eucharist flows from the rites, which indicate what we should teach about each sacrament. The *presence of the community* is an integral component of this program whereby their very presence gives witness to what it means to be a reconciling and eucharistic people.

Throughout this program the formative power of these sources is unleashed in order to both form and transform children, youth, and adults into the sacramental life of the Church. In the rest of the chapters in this manual you will see how the sources interconnect to lead people to conversion.

Conversion catechesis for sacraments takes the best of our resources to accomplish. It is far more than just scheduling four to six “classes” for children and two parent meetings. It requires our best catechists, those who are filled with passion and animated by their own conversion experience of reconciliation and

eucharist. It necessitates the use of the parish worship space and the commitment of the various liturgical ministers in the parish. It needs the commitment of our parish staffs who want to make it a priority in the parish.

If we are serious about conversion catechesis, we need to be prepared for what happens when the lives of people are touched and they are led to experience the power of the Paschal Mystery. Here’s an example of what I mean. I was recently doing the adult conversion catechesis for the parents and parish community for first reconciliation. After each session, it never failed

that people came forward to seek help for the hurts and suffering they were experiencing in their lives: divorce, separation, spousal abuse, adult children alienated from church, marriage problems, financial difficulties, etc. As a result, the parish decided that after each session they would have volunteers present who were active in the various ministries of the parish to address these situations. Another parish where this happened handed out an information sheet with a list of the ministries in the parish and the names and contact numbers of laity and clergy who could assist people with their various needs.

This is what happens when we begin to engage in conversion catechesis. This is why sacramental moments require special forms of catechesis. This is why the GDC has challenged us to embrace a new vision for catechesis based on the baptismal catechumenate. Sacramental moments are more than about “getting” a sacrament. They are about seizing the opportunity, when people are truly disposed to seek out the true meaning of life and to form and transform them into the Paschal Mystery.

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