

**EXPERIENCING
CHRIST:**

The Goal of Catechesis

JANET SCHAEFFLER, OP

► In my own religious education, I learned far more about Jesus from teachers and catechists who shared their own faith with me than I ever did from those who merely taught me facts. I asked Janet Schaeffler to share some ideas about how catechists can help children know Jesus more deeply. I think she did a terrific job. ~ NW

“**H**ow was your time today?” the dad asked his son as they drove home from the weekly faith formation session. “What did you learn?”

“It was ok. Don't remember what I learned.”

“Just ok? Tell me again who your catechist is.”

“Oh, I forget her name,” the boy replied, “but she must have been Jesus' grandmother. He's all she talks about.”

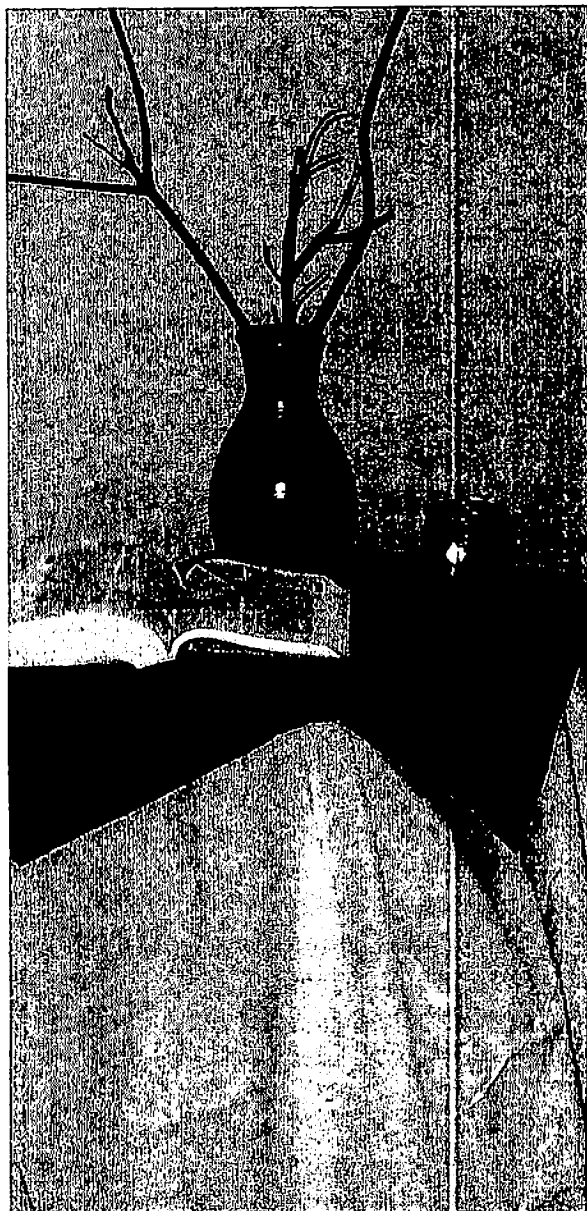
She's on the right track. The General Directory for Catechesis (80) quotes from *Catechesi Tradendae* when it says, “The definitive aim of catechesis is to put people not only in touch, but also in communion and intimacy, with Jesus Christ” (CT 5).

There are times when we need to step back and ask: are we catechizing for Churchianity or Christianity? There is absolutely no doubt that within the catechetical experience we want to pass on the beliefs, traditions, and practices of our faith, of our church. But the ultimate goal is about a person, Christ-ianity, a relationship with that person.

In school, we teach children about George Washington. They study the historical times. They read, study, perhaps memorize the Declaration of Independence, but they don't have a relationship with Washington.

Catechetics, faith formation is very different.

What do our religion classes and catechetical sessions have to look like for young people to “learn” how to experience the Risen Christ, rather



than just learn facts about the faith?

Of all the ways our classes and sessions could look, all methods need two things above all: more quiet and more action. We need to help young people become contemplatives, comfortable with silence, knowing how to take the time to listen to God within and all around. And we need to call them to community and mission, to being the Body of Christ. When we celebrate Eucharist each week, it is not just the bread and wine that are changed. We are changed into the Body of Christ, to leave that Eucharistic assembly and be Christ's Body throughout the week.

Methods

Some catechetical methods to help put learners in touch with the Risen Lord:

► **Prayer** Do we ever skip prayer or shorten the time because the "lesson plan" is filled with all this content and facts that we have to teach today? Yet, prayer is one of the pivotal ways we encounter Jesus and deepen our relationship. Fortunately, since the Second Vatican Council, we have realized that there are innumerable ways to pray. What a gift and responsibility we have as catechists and teachers to share these many beautiful ways of prayer with young people. Prayer needs to be the best-planned and least-rushed part of our time together.

► **Telling the story** The Word of God, especially the Gospels, needs to be told and retold in a lively way. Some people say the postmodern generation has lost its rootedness in one great story, a metanarrative. Christians have not lost their story. We are embedded in the story of Jesus and his message. Tell it creatively. Tell it so that it connects with people's lives.

► **Witness** We also have other stories, the stories of the wisdom figures

of our tradition, those who have gone before us as well as the contemporary witnesses in our own communities. Do children know those stories? Are your parish or school's wisdom figures invited to be part of the sessions?

► **Sacramentality** A core Catholic principle is sacramentality—God is present to us, and we respond to God's grace through our ordinary lives in the world. Our seven sacraments are the highpoint of this belief, but sacramentality goes much further. We meet God everywhere. Our time with young learners needs to help them develop this sensitivity and awareness, this ability of looking at their lives to recognize all the God-moments that are ever-present.

So what?

Everything that happens within our catechetical settings calls us to prayerful reflection. However, we are not something other-worldly, with our heads in the clouds. We need to ask ourselves questions that wake us up. So what? What does this have to do with my life? What's God asking of me? To grow closer to Jesus? To be his disciple? What does this have to do with my school life? With my life with my friends?

Faith sharing

While our textbooks give wonderful ideas for questions that help children recall the information once the facts have been presented, it is equally important that they be able to share their faith, their relationship with Jesus. Provide prayerful time in small groups, with open-ended questions and sentences such as:

When Jesus talks to me, it's like...

My favorite name for Jesus is...

This is how I feel when

I think of Jesus...

If Jesus were born today, where do I think he would be born?

Call to serve

Service is not a "project" that a person does in order to celebrate a sacrament. Service is our way of life. Service is response to the needs of those with whom we inhabit our world. Within the message of each catechetical session, there is the question: How is this calling me to reach out to others in my everyday life? Those beyond my everyday world? The Gospels call us to take each other in. Who am I called to take in? No catechetical session should end until we've provided time to decide on new or deepened ways to serve.

Involvement in making a difference

All around us in our neighborhoods, nation, and world there are challenges, disturbing realities of inhumanity, violence, injustice, disregard for human dignity, life and all creation, etc. It is never too early to begin helping young people explore their responsibility to speak out, using the Gospel and church's social teaching.

Everything flowing to and from Eucharist

There are many ways to connect your prayer and reflection to the Sunday Eucharist. One is to reflect on the psalm response, which often summarizes the readings and can become a prayer mantra for the week. Another way is to reflect on a parish wide or school wide question of the week. It should be a practical question, flowing from the Sunday readings, and relating the readings to our everyday lives, and it can be used for reflection and discussion during catechetical sessions and in the family (and throughout the parish). RTJ



Adrian Dominican Sister, Janet Schaeffler is the associate director for adult faith formation in the Office for Faith Formation/Catechetics for Archdiocese of Detroit. Her email address is schaeffler.janet@aod.org.