

Adolescent Catechesis and the National Directory for Catechesis: It's About Discipleship

By Daniel S. Mulhall

I'm fortunate enough to be the father of three children: two young adults and one in his early teens. My oldest, a daughter, actively participates in parish life, attends Mass, and serves as a catechist for 8th graders in our parish. My second child, a boy, is my "atheist in training." He has been "allergic" to anything to do with Church since he was a very small child. We get small glimmers of faith from time to time, but nothing sustainable yet. Our youngest attends Mass willingly, catechetical sessions/youth group unwillingly, and is basically not into churchy things. I don't know if he's just in that "not interested in anything" stage, if he has been corrupted by his older brother, or if he just hasn't been touched by the Spirit yet.

As you might guess, I am very concerned about whether or not my children will have faith. So, for me, the question about adolescent catechesis and the *National Directory for Catechesis* (NDC) is more than a professional exercise. In this article I will provide a look at what the NDC says about adolescent catechesis, and offer comments on how the *Directory's* guidelines affect the current practice of adolescent catechesis. Before moving to the section of the NDC that addresses the topic of adolescent catechesis, I first will address the broader context in which adolescent catechesis operates.

THE CONTEXT

The NDC is organized into ten chapters, along with the Introduction and Conclusion. Most of what pertains directly to adolescent catechesis appears in Chapter 7 "Catechizing the People of God in Diverse Settings" in section 48 D. What is said specifically about those who catechize adolescents is found in Chapter 8 "Those Who Catechize." However, what is said in these two chapters about adolescent catechesis can only be understood by what has been written in the intro and previous six chapters. So, before we focus on adolescents and those who catechize them, I'll offer a brief overview of the content of those previous chapters.

Quoting *Catechesi Tradendae*, the NDC notes that catechesis is:

"the totality of the Church's efforts to make disciples, to help men believe that Jesus is the Son of God so that believing they might have life in his name, and to educate and instruct them in this life, thus building up the body of Christ. (CT 1-2, see NDC page 6)

Adolescent catechesis, then, describes our efforts to make American teenagers into disciples who believe in Jesus, who know what he taught, and who have been integrated into the faith life of the parish community and that of the wider Church. The rest of the NDC explains how we should go about creating these young disciples.

- **Chapter 1** helps us to understand that we must understand the culture of teens and how they are influenced by the wider American and global cultures.
- **Chapter 2** establishes the meaning and context of catechesis: our challenge is to proclaim the Good News of Christ to young people so that they will hear and understand

it, and that they will come to believe and live what it says. The NDC calls these processes “evangelization” and “inculturation.”

- **Chapter 3** describes the elements of the Christian message that are to be presented to young people in such a way that they come to know and love the Lord Jesus.
- **Chapter 4** looks at the ways in which the Christian message can be presented. Special attention is given to God’s self-revelation in Christ through the Holy Spirit as the norm by which all catechetical methods should be judged. No one method is recommended over any other. Use the one that works best at any given time to bring young people to Christ.
- **Chapter 5** describes the relationship between catechesis and liturgy. This raises the question, “How can we, through catechesis, help young people understand the Church’s prayer and worship and become active participants in it?”
- **Chapter 6** presents almost a primer on the challenges young people, living in modern American culture, must overcome if they are to live out the Christian message. What must we do through catechesis to prepare them to overcome these challenges?

Now that you have a brief understanding of how the NDC applies to adolescent catechesis, we can examine in greater detail what the *Directory* says specifically about catechizing adolescents and the responsibilities and training needed by those who catechize them.

ADOLESCENT CATECHESIS

Chapter 7 gives principles, guidelines, and criteria for presenting the Gospel to different groups in diverse settings. The chapter begins with guidance about catechizing adults, elderly adults, and young adults before it gets to adolescents in section 48D (see page 199).

Much of the material that appears in this section is taken (either as a direct citation or in reference) from the 1997 U.S. Bishops document *Renewing the Vision (RTV)*. This is significant for several reasons. For one, the NDC reaffirms the direction for working with youth as expressed in RTV. For another, the NDC makes clear that youth ministry is an essential aspect of the parish’s catechetical process and (as detailed in chapter 8) names youth ministers as catechists and catechetical leaders. Both of these results will affect how adolescent catechesis is carried out both in schools and in parish programs.

Here’s what Chapter 7 says about catechizing adolescents:

1. Every individual has the responsibility both to grow personally in faith and to contribute to others’ growth in faith.
2. Catechesis takes into account the circumstances and cultures of those being catechized; there is but “one saving Word—Jesus Christ—but that word can be spoken in many different ways” (NDC 186).
3. Growth in faith is related to human development and passes through many stages; everyone develops in different ways according to his or her own pace.

4. Growing in faith means growing in communion with the Trinity through active participation in the sacraments, prayer, and generous service to others.
5. Catechesis must take into consideration all the human factors in order to present the Gospel message in vital and compelling ways; catechesis is a permanent school of the faith that follows major stages in life.
6. Adolescent Catechesis
 - Catechesis for adolescents should
 - take into account their physical, social and psychological development
 - present the words and example of Jesus and the saints in ways that appeal to young people
 - present Jesus as the Son of God, friend, guide, and model to be admired and imitated
 - present the basic content of Jesus' revelation
 - present the rational bases for faith, the coherent truth of the faith, and the relationship between the two
 - help young people to articulate the beliefs and teachings of the Church and to apply them to their lives
 - present other areas of Catholic belief including Scripture, the Church, worship and sacraments, and the principles of Christian morality
 - help young people experience a deeper relationship with God through prayer and service
 - include active participation in worship and community life with adult believers
 - include ongoing formation and regular reception of the sacraments of Eucharist and Penance
 - include catechesis for the Sacrament of Confirmation (depending on when the sacrament is celebrated in each diocese)
 - vocation discernment
 - Effective approaches for adolescent catechesis include catechesis on special themes, group projects and activities, membership in youth associations and groups, retreat, and spiritual direction.
 - Young people, fully initiated into the Church, are to be given adequate opportunities to serve the Church through its liturgical ministries.
 - Adolescent catechesis is most effective when integrated into a comprehensive program of pastoral ministry for youth that includes formation in community life, evangelization, learning about and active participation in justice and service, leadership development, pastoral care, and prayer and worship.
 - Adolescent catechesis is to help young people become disciples of Christ in the world, draw young people into responsible participation in the life, mission, and work of the Church, and to foster total personal and spiritual growth.
 - Catechesis for adolescents should include
 - the study of the Catholic faith and how faith develops
 - liturgy and prayer experiences
 - practical skills for living the Catholic faith today
 - a shared dialogue between the life of the adolescent and the wisdom of the Catholic Church

- learning methods and activities (including the arts and music) that engage and help young people explore religious concepts and ideas
- group participation (warm, trust-building, accepting, caring)
- real-life applications of learning
- programs that promote family values and encourage family participation
- activities that promote a Christian attitude toward human sexuality
- the recognition and celebration of the Church's unity and diversity
- a personal invitation to young people to consider a vocation to the priesthood or religious life
- instruction on ecumenism and the Church's relationship with other religions

The NDC also offers a few suggestions aimed specifically at youths in middle and junior high school

- Catechesis for middle and junior high school children should help them to
 - observe, explore, interpret, and evaluate their experiences in the light of faith
 - think of themselves as Christians and to act like a disciple of Christ according to the norms of faith and love
 - interiorize authentic Christian values and to make Christian decisions in today's society
 - develop a desire to grow in faith through study, prayer, and living as a Catholic

YOUTH MINISTRY

In Chapter 8, the NDC addresses those who are responsible for providing adolescent catechesis. Ultimately, in the parish, this responsibility resides with the pastor and his designated catechetical leader. But the youth minister is also included in this section. For young people in Catholic schools, the responsibility rests with the principal, teachers, and the campus minister. Here is a brief summary of what the *Directory* says about the youth minister and campus minister's responsibility for catechesis.

PARISH YOUTH MINISTERS

- Because a comprehensive youth ministry program includes a dimension of structured or formal catechesis, the coordinator of youth ministry should have theological formation, along with competence and experience in catechesis.
- Coordinators of youth ministry should be able to lead and guide young people to grow in the knowledge of the Catholic faith, in the practice of Christian morality and social justice, in the celebration of the sacraments, and in personal spiritual development.
- The youth minister's specific catechetical responsibilities are to be fulfilled in collaboration with pastors and other parish catechetical leaders.
- Coordinators of youth ministry are to
 - be models of Christian virtue and courageous witnesses to the Catholic faith
 - have the ability to speak credibly about their personal experience of faith
 - be adequately prepared to implement the Church's evangelical and catechetical mission
 - be experienced in working in catechesis with adults and youths

CAMPUS MINISTERS

- Campus ministers are to be professionally trained for their ministry
- They are to
 - form vibrant communities of faith
 - help students discern their vocations
 - ensure the availability of the sacraments to students and faculty
 - provide opportunities for educating for service and ministry within the Church and world
 - call forth and coordinate the gifts of the Spirit within the campus faith community
 - attend to their own personal, professional, and spiritual development
 - develop and maintaining close relationships with neighboring parishes and around the diocese
- Courses of study are to be provided through campus ministry to provide theological education, spiritual formation, and practical experience to prepare students to serve as catechists.

The *National Directory for Catechesis* takes what has been said in other Church documents and puts it together in such a way that a new picture emerges. It is now up to those who labor in the vineyard of adolescent catechesis to examine their programs and approaches to see what can be done to make their local picture resemble the one painted by the NDC. How are you with puzzles?

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