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National Conference for Catechetical Leadership



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Neil A. Parent

Kevin E. McKenna, Series Editor

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The Concise Guide series, edited by Kevin E. McKenna, tackles questions of central importance for contemporary Catholicism. Each book in the series carefully outlines the issues, references the necessary documents, and sketches answers to pressing pastoral questions.

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*To my wife Lynn
and to our daughters
Elena, Denise, and Diana
who have taught me more about adult faith
than they will ever know.*

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Preface

When Ave Maria Press invited me to write *A Concise Guide to Adult Faith Formation*, I was pleased and honored. At the same time, I began to worry about what I could possibly say that had not already been said, much of it by people far more gifted than I. For example, among the current literature available is Jane Regan's *Toward an Adult Church*, which lays out a compelling vision for a new educational paradigm focused on adults. *Nurturing Adult Faith: A Manual for Parish Leaders*, published by the National Conference for Catechetical Leadership (NCCL), is a treasure trove of solid, practical advice. And RCL Benziger, in partnership with NCCL, has published an adult faith formation module in its *Echoes of Faith Plus* series that provides excellent video and print resources for small group learning.

There are, moreover, the official catechetical documents that have been issued in the recent past, such as *the General Directory for Catechesis* and *the National Directory for Catechesis*. These present authoritative principles on adult faith formation to guide our efforts in this all-important ministry. In addition, the U.S. Bishops' pastoral letter on adult faith formation, *Our Hearts Were Burning Within Us*, identifies the action steps that need to be taken to move the entire enterprise forward in U.S. dioceses and parishes.

I decided eventually on a twofold approach. First, I would address areas where I thought more could or needed to be said. Second, I would address these topics with stories from my own experience as an adult faith formation leader. I especially thought I could help the reader by mining my own failures and successes. I wanted the reader not only to learn from my mistakes but also to realize that becoming a good adult faith formation leader involves both risk-taking and failure. The important thing is not that we always get it right, but that we always try to improve.

In terms of what needs to be said, I am convinced that not enough has been written about adult learners as modern spiritual sojourners. We cannot facilitate adults' growth in the faith if we do not understand what influences their spiritual choices. I also felt that independent learning and God as teacher warranted more attention. Since the advent of the World Wide Web, the learning paradigm has dramatically shifted in favor of greater reliance on independent learning. For this reason, I argue for more self-directed learning in adult faith formation and offer suggestions as to how to go about it.

As for God as teacher, I am convinced that we do not do enough to help adults attend more to the voice of God as their inner teacher. We tend to view the catechetical process almost exclusively in terms of what we do as pastors and catechetical leaders. But as both Augustine and Aquinas have counseled us, God is our primary teacher of the faith, and we need to listen to God's voice.

In this book, I propose five ways to attend to God as teacher. I do not mean to suggest that these are the primary or the best ways for us to learn from God. Liturgy, scripture reading (especially through *Lectio Divina*), spiritual counseling, spiritual reading, and a host of other methods are all aimed at our listening to God's voice. My main focus, rather, is on helping us recognize how modern life often strips away our ability to quiet down and allow ourselves to be taught by God. If we can help adults do this, we have already greatly aided their faith formation process.

The three other topics in the book: parish as a learning community, the adult learner, and program planning have all been written on extensively. Even so, one cannot write a book on adult faith formation without in some way addressing these critical areas. My approach, therefore, was to address them in a way that attempts to engender new insights based upon my own experiences.

Every writer's fear is that so many people have already written on his or her topic that they don't think they have

anything more to say. I certainly felt that. But I also remembered the classic advice given in such situations: “Only *you* can write from *your* perspective.” I hope my perspectives on adult faith formation prove to be of some value to the reader.

Finally, I wish to acknowledge those individuals who played a special role either in my adult education development or in this book’s preparation.

My interest in adult education sparked during my seminary years with the Paulist Fathers. Charles McCarthy, then a Paulist priest, invited me to assist him with an adult discussion group he was leading in Bowie, Maryland. That experience was foundational in my development as an adult educator, especially in terms of small group processes.

Msgr. Martin Quinn and now Bishop Anthony Justs were two visionary pastors for whom I worked. They encouraged me to take initiatives, one of which was a home-based learning program that was modeled on my Bowie experience. As I note later in this book, I facilitated one of the groups, and over the years that we met its members became my dearest friends and teachers. Much of what I write here was birthed in those countless evening sessions.

Another influential member of that parish staff was Rev. Gerard Creedon, now a highly regarded pastor in northern Virginia, who continually advocated for social justice as an essential component of adult faith formation.

I am also grateful to Dr. David Thomas who for years invited me to teach each summer in his graduate program in Adult Faith Formation and Family Ministry at Regis University in Denver. It was there that I honed much of my later thinking on adult education theory and practice.

As the Representative for Adult Education at the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, I was greatly aided and influenced by my colleagues on the National Advisory Committee on Adult Religious Education (NACARE). In particular, I am indebted to Maureen Shaughnessy, S.C., and Matt Hayes, both of who chaired the committee and enabled it to have a

major influence on adult faith formation in the country. They modeled what adult educators should be.

In my role as Executive Director of the NCCL, I was blessed to have an Adult Faith Formation team chaired by Jack McBride that continually challenged me to keep the adult education agenda front and center.

In developing this book's Appendix materials, I consulted a number of colleagues whom I admire and have worked with over many years. They include Ed Gordon; Sr. Janet Schaeffler, O.P.; Dan Mulhall; Rev. David Loftus; Rev. Berard L. Marthaler, O.F.M. Conv.; Sr. Angela Ann Zukowski, M.H.S.H.; Dr. Michael Steier; David Riley; Mark Nuehring, and Jim Schellman. I am grateful to them not only for their kind assistance with this book but also for being such great friends and colleagues over the years.

Finally, I wish to thank my editor Eileen Ponder of Ave Maria Press who guided me through the writing process and who edited the manuscript with wonderful deftness and grace.

Neil A. Parent

*The Adult as Christian
Disciple and Lifelong Learner*

The Critical Importance of Adult Faith Formation

Near the end of *Consuming Religion*, Vincent Miller's impressive analysis of consumerism's destructive effects on religion, he declares, "Catholicism desperately needs adult education on a scale that is daunting."¹ For Miller, today's voracious consumerism is robbing Catholics of their ability to be transformed by the Church's beliefs and symbols. Consequently, he sees the need for a massive educational effort to reconnect believers with the richness, wisdom, and power of their Catholic tradition.

While Miller's is one of the more alarming voices to call for a serious commitment to adult faith formation, it is by no means the first. In recent decades the Church has published an impressive array of documents that call for adult faith formation to be given top priority in its catechetical ministry. The most quoted passage in this regard originated with the 1971 *General Catechetical Directory* and has been repeated in virtually every major catechetical document since. The passage reads:

Catechesis for adults, since it deals with persons who are capable of an adherence that is fully responsible, must be considered the chief form of catechesis. All the other forms, which are indeed always necessary, are in some way oriented to it.²

In 1999, the United States Catholic Bishops sought to boost adult faith formation by issuing *Our Hearts Were Burning Within Us: A Pastoral Plan for Adult Faith Formation in the United States (OHWB)*. The document called for a renewed commitment to adult faith formation in parishes and dioceses, especially in terms of leadership development and the allocation of adequate resources. Despite the considerable effort that went into the plan's development and implementation, however, most church officials today would probably admit that we have barely scratched the surface of what needs to be done.

At the same time, those officials would agree that there is a lot of adult learning going on in many, if not most, parishes. Activities such as adult initiation ministries, retreats, Sunday liturgy, intergenerational gatherings, special programs for those with disabilities, leadership development, and sacramental preparation programs for parents demonstrate a commitment to adult faith formation. Still, these activities, however good and important, do not add up to our arriving at a critical sense of urgency that compels us to drop our old habits and seriously address the challenges of adult faith formation as called for in our major catechetical documents.

Why the urgency? The bottom line is this: The world is rapidly changing, and Catholic adults are changing with it. Catholics, like other Christians, are feeling less duty bound to institutional religion. According to the 2009 American Religious Identification Survey report, denominational affiliation in the United States is slipping in importance. The only group that grew in every state since the 2001 survey was people saying that they had "no" religion. This group has now reached 15

percent of the population, with Christians dropping from 86 percent in 1999 to 76 percent today.

The Church today has to prove itself on its own merits. It has to offer Catholics something uniquely desirable, a spiritual enrichment and way of life that is not attainable elsewhere. And unless it does this by reaching out to them, stirring their religious imaginations, and mentoring them into an authentic, fulfilling Catholic way of life, it will find itself with increasingly empty churches.

Empty churches also translate into the Church's depleted ability to carry out its core mission of making disciples of all nations.³ What is especially serious about this is that the Church exists for mission. In *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, Pope Paul VI wrote:

Evangelization is in fact the grace and vocation proper to the Church, her deepest identity. She exists in order to evangelize, that is to say, in order to preach and teach.⁴

Adult faith formation's critical role in the Church's evangelizing mission can be seen from its goals and tasks as identified in the major catechetical documents. The *National Directory for Catechesis* pulls together these contributions into the following synthesis:

THE GOALS OF ADULT CATECHESIS

Adult catechesis has three major goals (cf. *OHWB*, nos. 67–73).

1. It invites and enables adults "to acquire an attitude of *conversion to the Lord*" (*Adult Catechesis in the Christian Community [ACCC]*, no. 36). This attitude views the Christian life as a gradual transformation in Christ, in which the Christian takes on the mind of Christ, trusts in the Father's love, accepts the Spirit's guidance in searching out and obeying God's will, and seeks holiness of life within the Church. It fosters a baptismal spirituality in which the

Christian's faith in Jesus is continuously deepened through participation in the sacraments, the works of charity and justice, and the prayer life of the Church.

2. Catechesis for adults helps them make "a conscious and firm decision to live the gift and choice of faith through *membership in the Christian community*" (ACCC, no. 37). It fosters active participation in the Church as it is realized in families, small faith-based communities, parishes, dioceses, and the communion of saints. It helps adults develop a deeper sense of their cooperation with the Holy Spirit for the mission of the Church in the world, and for its internal life as well.
3. Catechesis for adults helps them become "more willing and able to be a *Christian disciple in the world*" (ACCC, no. 38). It enables adult disciples to accept their rightful place in the Church's mission to evangelize, to hear the cry for justice, to promote unity among Christians, and to bear witness to the salvation won by Jesus Christ for all.

THE TASKS OF ADULT CATECHESIS

The general task of adult catechesis is to "propose the Christian faith in its entirety and in its authenticity, in accordance with the Church's understanding. It must give priority to the proclamation of salvation, drawing attention to the many challenges to living a Christian life posed by American society and culture. It must introduce adults to a faith-filled reading of Sacred Scripture and the practice of prayer" (*General Directory for Catechesis* [GDC], no. 175). In particular, the major tasks of adult catechesis are as follows:

- To promote the formation and development of life in the Risen Christ through the sacraments, the prayer life of the Church, works of charity and justice, retreats, and spiritual direction.

-
- To promote evangelization as the means of bringing the Good News to all states of humanity (cf. *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, no. 18).
 - To educate toward the development of an informed moral conscience.
 - To clarify religious and moral questions.
 - To clarify the relationship between the Church and the world, especially in light of the Church's social doctrine.
 - To develop the rational foundations of the faith and demonstrate the compatibility of faith and reason.
 - *"To encourage adults to assume [their baptismal] responsibility for the Church's mission and to be able to give Christian witness in society"* (GDC, no. 175).
 - To develop creative ways through which to interest adults in and encourage them to take advantage of the various programs of enrichment and spiritual development being offered.⁵

In addition to the above tasks, several other reasons for urgency in developing better adult faith formation strategies deserve our attention. **One reason** is the need to equip parents and other adults to successfully hand on the faith to children. Family life is filled with "teachable moments" that parents can and must seize upon to nurture their children's religious imaginations and understanding. But they also need to be able to address honestly and informatively the kinds of thorny questions and statements that children, especially teenagers, often raise about the faith. "Why do we have to go to church when none of my friends have to go?" "I don't understand why the Church won't let Uncle Harry marry his friend, Dan. They love each other." "It's mean and stupid that the Church won't let us girls become priests."

As best they can, parents need to provide answers to such questions that are informed by the Church's teachings. And this does not mean merely dissecting the faith intellectually for their children. Rather, they need to explain the faith in ways that demonstrate their love for it and for the Church that expresses that faith. This would be true even if they themselves were struggling with their own understandings of certain Church teachings. Personal witness of the faith is an essential component of catechesis. As Pope Paul VI noted, "Modern man [*sic*] listens more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if he does listen to teachers, it's because they are witnesses."⁶

The simple fact is that if we cannot adequately explain and personally demonstrate "the reason for [our] . . . hope" to our children, they will be less inspired to follow in our spiritual footsteps.⁷ Indeed, the recent *National Study of Youth and Religion* identified the beliefs and faith practices of parents as having the most influence on the beliefs and practices of their children. Bishop Blasé Cupich of Rapid City, South Dakota, expressed it this way at a symposium exploring effective ways to hand on the faith:

The adult community must be able to demonstrate to young people not only that they have a grasp of the faith but that they are grasped by it.⁸

A second reason for giving more urgency to adult faith formation is that the Christian faith is, for the most part, an adult faith. Much of what it takes to understand the faith—not just with one's head but also with one's heart—can be dealt with adequately only in adulthood.

If the catechetical process stops in early adolescence, many adults are left without an adequate catechetical formation with which to address the kinds of questions and issues that invariably crop up in adulthood, such as the meaning and value of life, the problem of suffering, the moral implications of one's actions, and the longing for transcendence. These and many

other issues take on increasing catechetical relevance as one journeys through adulthood.

Related to this is the fact that abstract reasoning, which is so important to mature faith, does not fully develop until the teen years. And that, unfortunately, is just when catechesis ends for so many Catholics. This means that many adult Catholics were never adequately introduced to an understanding of the Church's metaphorical and symbolic language, which is an important theological tool for probing the faith more deeply.

St. Anselm said that theology is faith seeking understanding. While most adults would not see themselves as theologians, they do indeed practice theology as they seek to understand through the eyes of faith the myriad of issues that crop up in their lives. Adult faith formation helps equip them for this important task.

Tod Brown, the Bishop of Orange, California, underscored this very point in a recent pastoral letter to the Catholics of his diocese. "When was the last time you studied your Catholic faith?" he asked his flock. "You can't build your adult faith on a foundation of childish faith."⁹ Bishop Brown expressed in a religious way what Robert Maynard Hutchins, the educational philosopher and former president of the University of Chicago, said about learning in general: "Most of the important things that a human being ought to know cannot be comprehended in youth."

A third reason for comprehensive adult faith formation is the rapidly expanding ministerial role of the laity. As Pope Paul VI recognized more than thirty years ago, "the laity feel themselves called to work with their pastors in the service of the ecclesial community for its growth and life, by exercising a great variety of ministries according to the grace and charisms which the Lord is pleased to give them."¹⁰

Today, adults are being asked increasingly to carry out ministerial tasks as the need arises in their parishes. These ministers need to be credible representatives of the Church, capable of exercising their ministry effectively for the building

up of the body of Christ. Adult faith formation is a key means by which the gifts and charisms of adults can be nurtured and empowered for ministry.

Fourth, the growth of an authentic parish community is bound up with the development of an effective adult faith formation ministry. According to the Vatican's International Council for Catechesis, "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* in the catechetical enterprise."¹¹

As we shall see in the next chapter, adult faith formation and the parish community are like linked organs, each nourishing the other. Without a healthy parish community, adult faith formation will have a stunted development. And without good adult faith formation, a parish will never grow to its full potential.

Fifth and finally, the Church needs to engage adults vigorously in the pursuit of learning not only for their sake, but also for its sake. The Church is both an *ecclesia docens* (a teaching church) and an *ecclesia discens* (a learning church). As it has done through the ages, the Church must continually adapt to different times, cultures and circumstances in proclaiming the Good News. It must also unceasingly seek to renew itself, to be ever more faithful to its calling.

The Church's ability to make these changes largely depends upon its ability to learn from information and critique originating outside the echelons of top leadership. A well-informed laity can serve this important role and greatly help the Church in its ongoing process of adjustment and conversion.

In an increasingly complex and globalized society, the Church will need to rely more and more upon an educated laity to help it know how best to carry out and stay faithful to its Gospel mandate. If only for this reason, adult faith formation is absolutely integral to the life and mission of the Church.

The accomplishment of all the above tasks is dependent upon the Church helping its adult members understand that

discipleship in Jesus necessitates a lifelong commitment to learning in the faith. Indeed, the very word *disciple* means *learner*. To be a Christian disciple is to be a learner of Jesus, the master teacher.

The goal of this discipleship, as Paul writes in his letter to the Ephesians, is “to grow to the full maturity of Christ.”¹² Elsewhere, he says that we Christians “have the mind of Christ”; that is to say, we assume his attitudes, his way of thinking, his way of relating to others, especially to the poor and outcasts.¹³ These are aspects of discipleship, of learning in the faith that we will never outgrow.

Who Are Today's Catholic Adults?

The Church's reasons for making adult faith formation its top catechetical priority are both sweeping and compelling, but they fail to tell us anything specific about those we seek to serve here in the United States. Yet, it is the target audience that makes all the difference when it comes to any catechetical endeavor.

Let's look at some of the facts regarding Catholics in the United States. According to the 2008 Pew Religious Landscape Survey, Catholics make up 23.9 percent of the U.S. population.¹⁴ And while nearly one in three Americans (31 percent) were raised Catholic, fewer than one in four (24 percent) describe themselves as Catholic today. What this tells us is that we are not doing a good enough job of holding on to our members.

Dean Hoge, who until his death in September 2008 was professor of the sociology of religion at The Catholic University of America, long maintained that while the Catholic population in the United States shows some modest growth, the reason has more to do with immigration than with the attraction and retention of members. Were it not for the Hispanic immigration into this country, he asserted, the Catholic Church would show a decline in numbers, much like the mainline Protestant churches