



The Flipped Classroom: Kerygmatic Catechesis for Conversion

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“A new way of learning and thinking is developing, with unprecedented opportunities for establishing relationships and building fellowship.”

The Directory for Catechesis, no. 47

Introduction

In the modern history of the Church, there has not been a more difficult environment in which to catechize people in the truth and beauty of the Catholic faith. We have ample evidence that it is difficult and challenging, but we also have an approach to catechesis grounded in the first principle of the faith that can overcome these challenges. A catechesis that is the “echo of the kerygma”—the proclamation of salvation through Jesus Christ. “[K]erygmatic catechesis, which goes to the very heart of the faith and grasps the essence of the Christian message, is a catechesis which manifests the action of the Holy Spirit, who communicates God’s saving love in Jesus Christ and continues to give himself so that every human being may have the fullness of life.”¹

This paper proposes a catechesis with the kerygma at its heart. The discussion will unfold through the exploration of five topics:

- We are called to reimagine our approach to faith formation.
- We are called to reimagine a faith formation process that is missionary.
- We are called to reimagine how we accompany young people.
- We are called to reimagine a catechesis that speaks the language of young people.
- We are called to respond to the new generation with tools that meet young Catholics where they are.

¹ *Directory for Catechesis, no. 2*

We are called to reimagine our approach to faith formation.

Increasing rates of disaffiliation, the continued rise of those who do not identify with any religion, and the consequent decline in church attendance have provoked conversations in ministry for many years now. As a Church, how do we effectively evangelize and catechize our current and future generations of young people in the midst of a climate that is often antagonistic to faith? But far from taking place in the abstract, this conversation is intimately connected to the ministry of catechesis throughout the world, affecting millions of people including our own families and the families of those we serve as catechetical leaders. At the heart of this issue lies the pain of parents who witness their children's disinterest in faith, the sadness of grandparents who struggle to pass on their traditions, and the increasing rates of depression, anxiety, and suicide among young people² who are longing for meaning, authenticity, and community. Catechetical leaders stand at the intersection of these conversations as they endeavor to form young people in a coherent narrative of faith in a secular culture that largely works against it. These issues are important for catechetical leaders and catechists but also for the whole community of faith. These issues and their solutions should be an integral part of the work of all parishes, schools, and apostolates.

We are called to reimagine a faith formation process that is missionary.

In general today, particularly in the Western world, we are faced with a world that is overall less receptive to organized religion. We live in what has been called a post-modern secular age. In his book *A Secular Age*,³ Charles Taylor indicates that we have moved from a time when it was virtually impossible not to believe in God, to one in

which faith, even for a believer, is considered one possibility among many others. Our world, Taylor argues, is characterized not by the absence of belief or religion (although religious practice has declined), but rather by the multiplicity of new options—spiritual but not religious, nonreligious, antireligious—by which people try to make sense of their lives. For those in ministry, this reality can seem overwhelming and lead to discouragement, but if we consider our homes, neighborhoods, and communities as a mission field, new frontiers of possibility emerge before us. Jesus reminded his disciples to “look up and see the fields ripe for the harvest” (John 4:35) that lay before them rather than dwelling in a mentality of scarcity and decline. While we can look to the lessons of the past, we must also recognize that we are living in a new age, one characterized by the rapid rise of those who profess no religious identity, those who are formal members of communities but do not practice their faith, and those who have a tenuous connection to their faith. We have moved from what has been called an “era of Christendom” to an “era of apostolic missiondom”⁴ where the challenge before us lies in reawakening and reigniting the religious imagination of millions of people, where Jesus Christ and the power of the Gospel is at the center of our evangelizing actions, and where we establish and strengthen spiritual practices that incarnate that vision. It is an era where we must lean into the renewing action of the Holy Spirit who is the “soul of the Church”⁵ and always brings forth renewal in the midst of change. The only choice before us lies in what Pope Francis calls a “missionary option”—that is, a missionary impulse capable of transforming everything, so that the Church's customs, ways of doing things, times and schedules, language and structures can be suitably channeled for the evangelization of today's world rather than for her self-preservation.”⁶

² Even before COVID-19, the prevalence of mental illness among adults and youth was increasing. In 2017–2018, 19% of adults experienced a mental illness, an increase of 1.5 million people over last year's dataset. 9.7% of youth in the U.S. have severe major depression, compared to 9.2% in the previous year. See <https://www.mhanational.org/issues/state-mental-health-america>

³ See Taylor, Charles, *A Secular Age*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007.

⁴ See “From Christendom to Apostolic Mission” by Msgr. James Shea, University of St. Mary, May 1, 2020.

⁵ Pope Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, On Evangelization in the Modern World, Dec 8, 1975 #75.

⁶ Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, The Joy of the Gospel, November 24, 2013, #27.

Against this backdrop, the new *Directory for Catechesis*⁷ was launched and invites us to consider how to form young people as missionary disciples today. The new directory is positioned in dynamic continuity with other important documents of the Church, including the *National Directory for Catechesis* (released in 2005), and explores similar themes—evangelization in a postmodern world, the goals and tasks of catechesis, changes in the global context, and the implementation of the Magisterium with regard to contemporary evangelization and catechesis. *The National Directory for Catechesis* called us to “investigate new possibilities offered by the existence of the new technologies and imagine whole new models and systems if the Gospel message is to penetrate the culture, make sense to the next generation of Catholics, and bring about a response of faith.”⁸ *The National Directory* was released at a time when the pace of technological and scientific advances had rapidly progressed and social media was changing the landscape of how we communicated. Yet for many parishes, the approach to catechesis did not consider or fully utilize a more updated approach to reaching young people. As one catechetical leader remarked at a regional meeting, “We still approach faith formation using books as the dominant mode for the transmission of the faith without taking into account how to reach out to our families and young people outside of the classroom through technology.” This inertia is a problem that we must confront with a missionary approach to the ministry of evangelization and catechesis. Almost twenty years later, the heart of the *Directory for Catechesis* urges the Church to “place herself in a permanent state of mission all over the world, and to transform every one of her actions from a missionary perspective.”⁹ This includes catechesis, which is how the Church passes down its belief, practices, and traditions to current and new generations.

What is the goal of catechesis? The intimate communion

with Christ through a process of accompaniment.”¹⁰ Unfortunately, many young people come to religious education class to receive information and go home to their families where support for their faith is often lacking. There is little active accompaniment of our young people beyond sending home packets of information or emailing newsletters. While such efforts certainly constitute part of our accompaniment efforts, what is needed today is a more missionary approach to accompany our young people and their families that provides for a more personalized and relational approach.

We are called to reimagine how we accompany young people.

Recent research bears out the challenge of forming youth in a culture of secularization, materialism, and intense individualism. Released in 2017, *Going, Going, Gone: The Dynamics of Disaffiliation in Young Catholics*¹¹ sought to describe more fully, and in young people’s own words, why they have left or are considering leaving the Catholic Church. One of the statistics that perturbed many, and rightly so, is the stark reality that 74 percent of young people indicated they stopped identifying as Catholic between ages 10 and 20, with a median age of 13. Approximately 6.8 percent of U.S. teenagers between ages 15 and 17 are former Catholics, and yet nearly half (46 percent) are looking for another faith expression or practice that better aligns with their sense of spirituality. To be clear, those who drift away from the regular practice of their Catholic faith are not always walking away from God or faith, but the expression of religious practice emphasized in their local church that does not give them a compelling reason to believe. When it comes to religious affiliation, middle school is a critical time in shaping future religiosity for our young people.

For catechetical leaders, one of the key insights from the *Going, Going, Gone* study is that young people are spiri-

⁷ The new *Directory for Catechesis* was publicly released on June 25, 2020 by the Pontifical Council for the Promotion of the New Evangelization

⁸ The *National Directory for Catechesis*, 2005, no. 16.

⁹ Pontifical Council for the New Evangelization, *Directory for Catechesis*, no. 49. 2020, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, July 20, 2020.

¹⁰ *Directory for Catechesis*, no. 3.

¹¹ This survey was conducted by St. Mary’s Press in collaboration with the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate at Georgetown University.

tually hungry and yearn for a connection to a community that is nonjudgmental and characterized by ongoing dialogue. Young people favor an approach that is less didactic and fixed, and more open and conversant with the real issues they are facing. Yet they want clear information, presented well, in a way that is thoughtful and challenging. In the document *Gaudium et Spes* from the Second Vatican Council, we read the following: “The Church has always had the duty of scrutinizing the signs of the times and of interpreting them in the light of the Gospel.¹²” To scrutinize the signs of the times, however, we catechists must first recognize and be familiar with them. This does not mean that we should allow society, politics, or culture to set the agenda for our ministry of evangelization and catechesis. But it does mean that we need to search for entry points into the lives of those we teach. Saint Ignatius of Loyola spoke of this process as “entering through their door but leaving through your own.” Our task is to identify these “doorways” and introduce through them the light of Christ, trusting it to illuminate what is good and to expose what needs to be transformed.

What is needed today is missionary discipleship formation that bridges the gap between faith learning and faith living and encompasses a comprehensive accompaniment process that includes individual reflection balanced by community interaction. This is a move from a “sage on a stage” model to a “guide on the side” accompaniment approach that emphasizes mentorship and the journey of faith itself. An approach with a strong doctrinal and scriptural focus should be balanced with an innovative methodology that meets the needs of young people today. It is out of such a process that we can imagine and reimagine new possibilities to support Catholic belief and practices.

We are called to reimagine a catechesis that speaks the language of young people.

Imagine if you could positively shape the understanding of young people’s experience of faith before they ever set

foot in a classroom or turned on their computer. Imagine if young people came to class ready and excited to share their hopes, dreams, doubts, and questions. Imagine if young people saw themselves as active participants in their own journey of faith and were equipped to share their faith with their family, friends, and the wider society through peer-to-peer sharing. Imagine if young people encountered Jesus as missionary disciples and lived out that encounter every day. Imagine.

The flipped classroom model by Loyola Press speaks the language of young people with an integrated missionary process of formation that is based on the needs of young people, putting them into active dialogue with their own faith and the faith of others. This approach reimagines a missionary model of faith formation. This approach builds community from the ‘inside out’ where discussion of essential questions is encouraged, spiritual practices are supported, and a joyful encounter with Jesus Christ is facilitated and nurtured.

In the absence of a culture that supports and reinforces the faith, without strong communal bonds in our society and with the weakening of the family unit, religious literacy has steadily declined. Catholicism was reduced to “what was learned” but not what was applied or lived, and so faith *learning* and faith *living* became increasingly disconnected. In the past, faith formation was largely characterized by a traditional classroom-based religious instructional methodology that heavily emphasized doctrinal content, memorization, and monologue instead of employing the full range of methods to form young people that the Church outlines, including learning by human experience, learning by discipleship, the witness of the Christian community, the Christian family and home, the witness of the catechist, learning by heart, learning by Christian living, and learning by apprenticeship.¹³

It could be argued that in the past, the beginning point of catechesis was instruction. As such, catechesis was “defi-

¹² Pope Paul VI, *Gaudium et Spes*, The Pastoral Constitution of the Church in the Modern World, no. 4, 1965. ¹³ The *National Directory for Catechesis*, 2005, no. 16.

¹³ To learn more about the elements of divine pedagogy and methodologies, see *Developing Disciples of Christ: Understanding the Critical Relationship Between Evangelization and Catechesis* published by Loyola Press.

inition-based” in that the beginning of knowledge began with the Church’s definition of any number of issues and proceeded from there. Catechesis is too often understood solely as the transmission of information when, in reality, it is an apprenticeship into a way of life in the context of a relationship with Jesus Christ.

Jesus used ordinary experiences and images from everyday life—such as fishing, planting, growing, harvesting, and shepherding—to bridge complex concepts about the Kingdom of God and the world. The most effective catechists do the same. When we learn something new, we start with our lived experience and bridge what is known to what is unknown. We try to make sense of the world around us by making associations between it and what is already familiar and real. Content and experience are inextricably linked. We are reminded that any catechesis “that sets up an opposition between the content and the experience of faith would show itself to be worthless. Without the experience of faith, one would be deprived of a true encounter with God and with one’s brothers; the absence of content would block the maturation of faith, keeping one from finding meaning in the Church and living the encounter and exchange with others.”¹⁴ Experience and content are clearly related and must be balanced so that we employ a full range of methodologies to form young people

As a catechetical leader, you are part of a larger legacy of catechetical ministers that stretches all the way back to Christ himself, the Master Teacher. The task we have been entrusted with—sharing our Catholic faith with others—is a great privilege, responsibility, and gift. To do our job well as catechetical ministers, we need to balance and integrate three aspects of faith.

- Who we present (Jesus)
- What we present (content)
- How we present the faith (methodology)

The flipped classroom approach integrates all three aspects and provides catechists with practical support

throughout the entire process in print materials and enhanced media content. The *Flipped Classroom Leader Guides* use a four-step instructional approach based on Ignatian pedagogy.

- ▶ **Engage.** In the first phase of instruction, young people come together in a classroom or youth group setting after encountering the rich text and activities in the book at home. Each group or classroom session begins with sparking young people’s interest by drawing on their knowledge of the session content and their prior experience. This gives young people an opportunity to reflect and think through the material, questions, and content prior to coming to class.
- ▶ **Explore.** During this step, young people work in small groups to complete hands-on art projects while discussing essential questions related to the session’s theme.
- ▶ **Reflect.** Young people pray various forms of prayer, often supported by Scripture. This step prepares young people to enter more fully into a personal, ongoing relationship with God and be able to articulate that relationship to others.
- ▶ **Respond.** In this step, young people are challenged to go forth as missionary disciples to undertake action items before the next class or group meeting through a Missionary Discipleship Challenge. Each session concludes with group prayers of intercession.

The goal of the flipped classroom model is to create a space where questions can be asked, stories are shared, and dialogue is facilitated in a safe and nonjudgmental manner. In this way, young people are most likely to encounter Jesus in themselves, others, and the wider world. At a pivotal age in their development, young people are supported with personalized learning experiences so that they can reflect as individuals before entering into a community of faith where discussion is engaged and supported. This allows each young person to experience a fuller conversation that links the classroom with real

¹⁴ *Directory for Catechesis*, no. 80.

life so that he or she can be an authentic, well-prepared, and joyful witness for the Catholic faith. Robust intellectual and doctrinal formation is combined with affective experiences and kinesthetic learning to accommodate a full range of learning styles. The heart of the flipped classroom is development in prayer—young people not only learn how to pray but how to cultivate their own prayer lives and live out of and share that relationship with God and others.

Intellectual formation is undergirded by a clear presentation of the Church's teachings and includes liturgical, spiritual, and moral formation, all of which are accommodated with the flipped classroom approach. This model highlights personal autonomy balanced by a supportive community where doubts are shared, experiences are mined, and formation is provided that is practical and yet inspirational. In the spirit of Saint Ignatius of Loyola who points us always to a personal relationship with Jesus Christ and in keeping with their mission to "facilitate transformative experiences of God, people of all ages can lead holy and purposeful lives with and for others."

We are called to respond to the new generation with tools that meet young Catholics where they are.

The Directory for Catechesis puts it this way: "[I]t is good for communities to strive not only to address this new cultural challenge, but also to respond to the new generations with the tools that are already in common use in teaching." (*Directory for Catechesis*, no. 216). Flipping the traditional model of instruction is one such tool. Blended learning is another. Through blended learning, young people experience the content through a combination of in-person interactions and dynamic multimedia content, such as audio, video, and interactives, which help "people learn more deeply from words and pictures than from words alone" (*Multimedia Learning* 2nd Edition by Richard E. Mayer, p. 47). The use of multimedia as part of well-designed instruction increases motivation to learn and taps into positive emotions thereby promoting active learning and internalization of content, making the rich content part of their own schema, connecting it to prior lived experience and beliefs.

In the flipped classroom approach in *Finding God* Grades 7 and 8, young people utilize the Interactive Session Reviews to assess their understanding of the content they learn at home and are provided with immediate feedback. They can retake the review as many times as they wish before submitting it to the teacher or catechist. Further, the Missionary Discipleship Challenge element invites young people to use multimedia as a catalyst for evangelization as they share and discuss the multimedia pieces they experience in the Engage step of the classroom or youth group session.

We can use these tools to great effect in the religious education classroom not just because these methodologies and tools are in common practice, but because they are proven to promote learning and increase engagement.

Conclusion

The approach clearly and concisely realized in the *Finding God Flipped Classroom Leader Guide* takes the challenge to form young people as missionary disciples seriously and offers catechists a way to truly accompany young people in carrying on the Church's important task to evangelize and catechize.

A Personal Note

My first parish position as a catechetical leader and youth minister in the United States was in a small rural community with an enrollment of approximately 400 students that also included teaching middle and high school students. During this time, I learned a lot about young people and the rhythm of parish life. After a number of years, I took a position as a catechetical leader in a larger city where four parish programs were merged into one program. Despite the size of the program, numbers were steadily declining, and it was difficult to retain and recruit catechists. I quickly realized that previous catechist in-services had been largely focused on using "the books" and teaching "from the books" rather than on forming catechists for the challenge of proclaiming the Gospel and forming young people in a postmodern context. Classes felt one dimensional, and classrooms were muted from lack of engagement. This all-too-common approach to

faith formation felt outdated, and a subtle but discernible frustration could be felt from the students, their families and my catechists. Everyone knew that this approach to faith formation had to change, but I was not sure how to begin despite having advanced degrees in theology. One day, inspiration came in the form of a flier I received in the parish mailbox that emphasized a more balanced approach to faith formation. This was the sign that I needed to begin changing the experience for my students.

With an immense challenge before me, I decided to re-imagine the process of faith formation with the help of a willing team of catechists who wanted to be part of the solution to form disciples in our parish. No longer would students show up to class and read from the book. No longer would parent nights focus on “the handbook” and policy. No longer would catechist in-services be twice a year and solely focused on getting through material. We made changes, and the response was overwhelmingly positive.

Before class, students gathered in large groups for intercessory prayer with their parents and catechists. After a time, we modeled faith sharing and witness as a normative part of our religious tradition. We also incorporated intercessory prayer, music, and more Scripture in our lessons and encouraged parents to gather for fellowship and talks on a number of relevant topics. Steadily, the number of students grew, and we added youth ministry to the process. We had small groups of students meeting voluntarily to learn about the Bible and the saints and to carry out acts of service. We had no difficulty recruiting and retaining catechists who enjoyed regular in-services focused on prayer, spirituality, catechesis, and how to reach out to our young people.

What was the flier that sparked this new approach to faith formation? It was a flier for the program *Finding God*—at that time the new faith formation program offered by

Loyola Press! The curriculum came with CD players, which was a first in our parish, and our students now listened to Bible stories, songs, and prayers. New and interesting formats were outlined for catechist in-services, and newsletters came to my inbox with all kinds of ideas for lessons and ministering to parents, students, and catechists. At a time when I did not have a mentor for catechesis, I depended on the *Finding God* network for help.

Fast-forward to today.

As a parent of a child entering middle school, I know firsthand that our approach to faith formation needs to look and feel different. How I wish that every catechist, student, and parent could have access to the flipped classroom approach! It is comprehensive and engaging, grounded in tradition yet innovative. As a parent, I can listen to episodes of “carpool catechesis” alone or with my family and learn more about the Church’s teaching and how to talk to my own children about difficult issues. I can read from the student book that includes beautiful imagery from sacred art and prayers in both English and Latin. My child can learn in a small group with his peers in a way that feels natural and dialogical. Together as a family we can learn together and apply what we are learning to our lives. For catechists and catechetical leaders, the support and encouragement to nourish your vocation as catechists is woven into the fabric of this approach. Loyola Press cares about our parishes as spaces of prayer and missionary discipleship. They care about catechists, young people, and our families. If they could care for me twenty years ago as a struggling and demoralized catechetical leader, they can care for you, your catechists, and your students.

I could not have imagined that when I began in ministry that such a comprehensive approach would exist today, but it does. You don’t have to imagine anymore with the flipped classroom! It’s right here for you.

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