THE HEART OF CATECHESIS:
New Evangelization & A New Catechesis
updated 7/22/14

THE CHALLENGE
We’re fumbling the ball...again! For fifty years we’ve been forming and informing
our children with a catechesis which is often without substance;
warm smiles and wide fellowship; rainbows and coloring projects; overtly
experiential “feel-good” moments...all integrated and orchestrated with the
omnipresent mantra; “I am special”! We have already lost two generations and
are well on our way to losing the third.

Even in parishes where the priests, the DRE and the catechists are dedicated
and well-formed, we are not winning the minds and the hearts of our students. I
have been closely involved with religious education for thirty years—first as a
catechist, later as priest and pastor—and have experienced firsthand the “good,
the bad...and the ugly” in the catechetical establishment. In one of the best
parishes where I served as pastor, we had an orthodox and organized DRE,
dedicated and well-formed catechists, and had been using the excellent Ignatius
Press “Faith in Life” series for four years. Most of the classes were visited
weekly by the parish priests, who were very committed to solid and substantial
religious education. The DRE and I still sensed, however, that we were not
effectively conveying the Truth, the Goodness, and the Beauty of the Catholic
Faith to our students.

One evening towards the end of an academic year I showed up at class time with
a very basic quiz I had put together. I administered it to our seventh and eighth
grade students and graded the tests myself. More than 75% of the students
tested could not begin accurately to define or describe the Mysteries of the Holy
Trinity or the Incarnation. Some of them had a vague and nebulous notion of the
former; most missed the boat entirely on the latter. 80% of those tested could
not list even half of the Ten Commandments or the Seven Sacraments. These
truths were not new to them; in addition to our textbooks and excellent
catechists, I had covered this material with them myself during classroom
visitations repeatedly over five years. Our kids were not stupid. But
unimpressive results of this sort should be expected when little or no effort has
been made to encourage systematic memorization of the teachings of our
Faith from year to year. We would certainly obtain similarly discouraging results
if we polled that wide body of adult Americans who currently describe themselves
as “practicing Catholics.”

AFFIRMATION OR CONFIRMATION
In many dioceses kids usually receive the Sacrament of Confirmation in the
eighth or ninth grade. Over the past three decades I’ve participated in
Confirmation Liturgies for hundreds of kids entrusted to me. Working with these
kids has been a great experience, but my overriding impression of our confirmandi at those ceremonies—after they have gotten over a passing excitement about the event itself—is that the vast majority of them weigh in somewhere between apathy and indifference. A certain air of anticipation is evident, but seems to be rooted in their desire to “graduate” and be done with it all. This point is powerfully driven home by the post-Confirmation attrition in our religious education programs. Noting this phenomenon, Pope Francis ironically has referred to Confirmation as the “Sacrament of Farewell” and regretfully assesses this dynamic as “an experience of failure.” Most of our confirmandi, in spite of our best efforts, view the sacrament as a “rite of passage”... a “graduation” of sorts that effectively ends the necessity for religious education which they [and their parents] never took seriously to begin with.

The challenge before us is formidable. The children of this generation are growing up in the most distracted culture which has ever existed. Kids wander for hours each day through fantasy netscapes, listening to iTunes on iPods or iPhones, “texting” and “friending” each other on “Facebook”... twittering amidst the tangled tendrils of virtual relationships on the world wide web. With parish religious education, the most we can hope for is to have the kids for an hour a week from September through May. And anyone who has spent time in religious education has experienced the frustration of seeing parents persistently putting their kids’ ordinary school functions, sports, and other activities above religious education in priority—so we can’t even count on that single hour. Many of these parents attend Mass only occasionally [if at all] and a greater number make little or no use of the Sacrament of Confession. Textbooks, no matter how good they might be, are not taken seriously and students do not often read them outside of class. Usually children [and their parents] ignore the work that is sent home. What hope have we of teaching these young people, formed by “YouTube” snippets and soundbyte philosophies, the truths of our Faith, or the importance of prayer and the interior life?

If we think we can compete effectively in this scenario without radically altering our approach, we are mistaken. For nearly 20 years we have been striving to implement Blessed John Paul II’s call to establish a “New Evangelization” to “go out to all the world and tell the good news!” But Nemo dat quod non habet... “we cannot give what we do not have.” An effective and coherent New Evangelization must be formed by and proceed from a “New Catechesis” if we plan successfully to prepare and perfect those who are to take part in our great mission in this generation...and the next.

THE RESPONSE: CHRISTOCENTRIC CATECHESIS
Certainly the greatest weakness of most catechetical approaches is that they are not sufficiently Christ-centered. Although Jesus may be mentioned with some frequency, weeks may pass [or longer periods still] without spending significant class time reflecting on His words or pondering the events of His life. In our catechesis [and in our catechetical textbooks—even the best of them], we tend to
present our material according to our own agenda and methodology. We then bring Jesus Christ in as an illustration, a sort of “audiovisual aid” to illuminate the point we are trying to make.

That He is the Lord and Creator of the universe, our Savior and Redeemer, has certainly been presented to the students at one time or another, but such concepts usually end up lost in the legion of appealing ideas our students have heard but have not bothered to ponder or remember or embrace with their minds and hearts. We are making a mistake similar to that of St. Paul on the Areopagus [Acts 17:16—34]. Having carefully crafted a classic exposition of rhetorical expression, Paul struck out. The crowds sneered and walked away; “We must hear you on this topic some other time.” Later, Paul reflects on his failure in his letter to the Corinthians and outlines what his new approach must be, “I determined that while I was with you I would speak of nothing but Jesus Christ and Him crucified [see 1 COR 2:1—5].”

With great anticipation we awaited the advent of the Catechism of the Catholic Church. Although we’ve had it in hand for two decades we still have a long way to go before we are employing it effectively. The quintessential and crucial insight of this great catechism is asserted in #426—7:

At the heart of catechesis we find, in essence, a Person, the Person of Jesus of Nazareth, the only Son from the Father…who suffered and died for us and who now, after rising, is living with us forever.

To catechize is “to reveal in the Person of Christ the whole of God’s eternal design reaching fulfillment in that Person. It is to seek to understand the meaning of Christ’s actions and words and of the signs worked by Him”

In catechesis “Christ the Incarnate Word and Son of God, …is taught—everything else is taught with reference to Him—and it is Christ alone who teaches….every catechist should be able to apply to himself the mysterious words of Jesus: “My teaching is not mine, but His who sent Me” [CCC #426-7 and CT #5-6].

If we seek to catechize effectively, Jesus Christ must be clearly present at the heart of every catechetical session. In this proposal we outline a new methodology and approach to catechesis which incorporates the following elements:

- A three-year repeatable cycle of studies which uses the Bible as a “textbook” and which is centered about the Life of Jesus Christ,
- Weekly lesson booklets and guides which provide information and formation for parents and catechists
- Provision for systematic memorization of crucial philosophical and theological concepts which constitute “the Heart of Catechesis”
Suggestions for Parish implementation involving Exposition, Benediction, and Liturgical prayer with the Blessed Sacrament at the start of each learning session

Suggestions for home-based, family catechesis

For more advanced studies [RCIA, Mystagogia, Bible Studies, Teen & Adult formation] a detailed “Christocentric” syllabus based on the Life of Jesus Christ which can be used as a “matrix” for re-organizing and “re-presenting” material from other programs

Materials available and downloadable at no cost through the internet

AT THE FEET OF THE TEACHER

During my last parish assignment we didn’t begin our 75-minute catechetical sessions in the classroom with the kids in desks and the teachers poised to lead a prayer before a blackboard or “smart” screen. Instead, the parents brought their kids into the church, where the Blessed Sacrament was exposed and the children were leading the Rosary [the kids who led the decades arrived early—about 20 minutes before the scheduled class time]. The students gathered together in the pews with their classmates and catechists. A growing group of parents and other adult parishioners began to join us for this liturgy. The Rosary concluded at 6:00 pm…the “official time” that classes began.

At this point we continued with a few moments of silent prayer before Our Lord suspended in the Monstrance, then a very brief meditation/reflection was offered by one of the priests, introducing the catechetical topic that would be taught in class during that particular week. A simplified version of Benediction followed—we used four different “benediction booklets” as we cycled through the course of the liturgical and academic year. We sang Tantum Ergo and O Salutaris Hostia, either in Latin or in English. We offered a catechetical prayer which reinforced weekly our belief that the “Body, Blood, Soul, and Divinity” of Jesus are really and truly present in the Holy Eucharist. The Benediction was given, the children “echoed” the Divine Praises, and following Reposition and with a recessional hymn the kids were off to class for an hour of instruction.

“Sacrificing” 15 of the 75 minutes of weekly class time was not a loss but an investment. Most of our children [and the majority of their parents] had never participated in Exposition or Benediction; in our parish they experienced it weekly. Is there a better place to begin religious education classes than at the feet of “the Rabbi?” Most of our catechists expressed how this sacramental moment helped them with their lessons, and notably improved the behavior of students in class. Experienced catechists are well aware that it is unrealistic to expect a classroom full of kids who have already put in a full day at school to stay focused in religious education for more than an hour. Beginning in the church praying, singing, and being instructed before the Holy Eucharist, effectively engaged the kids on a sensory and “affective” level. One experience I had of a young lad in our parish illustrates this point nicely. Entering the church holding his mother’s hand, he gazed up at the altar and the cloud of smoke suspended above the sanctuary, and said in an awe-filled stage whisper, “It smells like Jesus in here!”
SYSTEMATIC MEMORIZATION

In addition to this weekly “affective” Eucharistic encounter with Christ, if we are to succeed in bringing our kids closer to Jesus in their hearts and in their minds, we must lay a solid intellectual and catechetical foundation. **Some degree of systematic memorization, which is expanded and reinforced from year to year, is absolutely necessary.** With the younger children in particular, we need to use the opportunity of the especially deep and lasting impressions made by early memories and memorization. If certain elements of our culture use technology and the media effectively to intrude into the consciousness of our kids, leaving disturbing images and dirty lyrics—why should we not strive to instill in memory and imagination ideas, impressions, and thoughts of the True, the Good, and the Beautiful?

THE HEART OF CATECHESIS

With the idea of establishing this “foundation of memory,” my DRE and I have, over a period of time, distilled a body of basic and essential information to clarify and crystallize Catholic thought. Our objective with these terms and descriptions is to express and convey the truth with accuracy, clarity, and simplicity. We have formulated these explanations following certain patterns and turns of phrase so that they might be more easily memorized. This core of material, which we include in our *Heart of Catechesis* manual, includes a number of short interrelated concepts explaining the Articles of Faith in the Nicene Creed, descriptions of the Seven Sacraments, and a simplified list of the Ten Commandments. Certain basic theological and philosophical terms are also presented [e.g. “Incarnation,” “Truth,” “Substance,” “Nature,” etc.] to help the kids understand and explain the relationship between Faith and Reason. We have also included a “Where is it in the Bible?” section—chapter citations for texts in scripture that every Catholic should easily be able to remember and locate.

Because they tend to “crowd out” of memory more essential prayers and concepts, we did not include a number of long lists and less important prayers [e.g. the Twelve Fruits of the Holy Spirit...the Spiritual and Corporal Works of Mercy, the acts of Faith, Hope, and Love etc.] which were often presented in earlier catechisms. We focused instead on the most essential prayers and truths of our Faith. In all, our *Heart of Catechesis* manual is about five pages long—and is presented to and memorized by the students in our program incrementally over the years. Another small booklet is distributed to be used by parents to teach their children the basic and central prayers of our Faith. Committing these prayers, ideas, and definitions to memory provides a foundation for further reflection, discussion, and intellectual development throughout the years of their academic formation, and beyond. If a person has not committed a body of truth to memory, he cannot very well “treasure these things and ponder them in his heart.”
THE 3-YEAR CYCLE OF STUDIES

The *Heart of Catechesis* manual is the foundation for a Three-Year Cycle of studies, and its content is re-presented each year as a part of that particular year’s syllabus. All grade levels study the same topic during a given week, so that parents, older children, and younger children are pondering the same stories and mysteries at the same time. We have found that this facilitates a dialogue among the different family members…with the parents listening to their older kids’ questions and attempting to answer them, and the older siblings explaining mysteries of the Faith to their younger brothers and sisters [or vice versa!]

Year One is the most important year: “*Jesus Christ: Son of God and Son of Man*”…a study focused on the Life of Jesus Christ. Using the Gospels, we present an historical and chronological account of Jesus’ life, death, and Resurrection. In Year Two we follow with a study of “*Our Catholic Church: The Acts of the Apostles and The Mystical Body of Christ.*” In Year Three, “*The Old Testament and Salvation History,*” we turn to a consideration of Old Testament stories and ponder how the New Testament is hidden in the Old, while the promises of the Old Testament are fulfilled in the New.

In years #2 and #3, although we consider from week to week the chronological unfolding of the events of the Old Testament and the Acts of the Apostles, time is spent during every class session considering a story from Jesus’ life and how it relates to the topic or theme we are pondering for that week. This “keystone” in the classroom presentations in years #2 and #3 we call “*Do this in Memory of Me—Moments from the Life of Jesus Christ.*” Catechesis should never wander too far from the Good Shepherd Who is its heart.

Overall, 21 lessons are offered each year. To these we add extensive review sessions and scheduled testing periods. The entire 81 session cycle is presented over three years. As the years pass and the cycle is repeated a second and third time, a child starting the program in Kindergarten would have the core material presented progressively each year, with new and more advanced material added at his catechist’s discretion in each successive rotation.

“TEXTBOOKS”

In our parish we had been using the Ignatius Press “*Faith in Life*” series. We believe that it is the best textbook in print, but overall our results were not satisfactory. The catechists had some difficulty with continuity from year to year, and the kids simply were not remembering or adequately processing the excellent material presented through these texts. A significant majority were not reading the books outside of class. A number of the catechists were just having students read portions of the week’s lesson out loud during class time each week. Not a very exciting [or effective] pedagogy.

When we initiated our *Heart of Catechesis* program, we shifted our primary focus from “*Faith in Life*” to the *Bible*, with some use of the *Catechism of the
Catholic Church, the Baltimore Catechism, and a number of shorter works for the younger kids [we also still made the Ignatius publications available to teachers who desired to use them as a supplement]. Students in Grades K-4 received the “New Catholic Picture Bible.” Grades 5 through High School received the “Giant Print” hard cover edition of “The New American Bible.” It is the translation used in our Lectionary at Mass, is relatively easy to read, and the distracting [and sometimes questionable] footnotes are presented as “endnotes,” conveniently out of the way [at the end of each book]. The sequential page numbers from Genesis through Revelation are useful points of reference for those who are not yet adept at locating Scripture passages using the “book, chapter, and verse” method of citation.

We made these same Bibles available to every family in the parish, so that parents could read and highlight their own copies, studying along with their kids. There is every reason to hope that these very durable Bibles will be kept and used in the years ahead—in a way that textbooks and catechisms, whatever their merits may be, are not.

WEEKLY LESSON BOOKLETS: CATECHIST & PARENT INFORMATION AND FORMATION  One significant weakness in parish religious education is that we are unable to provide sufficient opportunity for the continued formation and development of catechists and parents—nor are they able to find and make the time themselves. Many dioceses offer excellent programs for continuing education and certification, but most of our catechists are overextended—good fathers and mothers who are already taking significant time away from their families to prepare their classes and to catechize in our parishes during the week.

Recognizing this, the primary formation for our catechists is accomplished through the Lesson Booklets that we provided for their use in class preparation. These booklets, [which are also provided for our parents], begin with citations from Sacred Scripture which we hope will be read, pondered, and prayed. Ideally the catechists and parents will be able to take time each day to do this. Their teaching should tend to be something more than a mere re-presentation of the materials provided for them, flowing from their own prayer, experience, understanding, and application.

The Lesson Booklets also incorporate a review of information from previous classes, a “primary theme” for the week, and Heart of Catechesis material. The format we follow is the classic catechetical “Question & Answer” presentation. Catechists adapt the information to their particular grade level and their students’ abilities, and are allowed a significant degree of freedom to employ their own style of teaching as they lead their students through a discussion of the Scriptures. Portions of the lesson may at times be put aside, as long as the important material—“Do This in Memory of Me,” the Heart of Catechesis information, and the primary themes—are effectively
communicated. After using this approach for a while, one of our catechists observed…

First, let me say…I was not completely embracing my new assignment. But let me tell you, those materials are dummy-proof. I have barely a need to prepare for class…I think a catechist with a basic knowledge of the Faith, Church History, and ritual, can take those weekly sets and deliver an excellent class.

I am able to pray with them, have a topic, read Scripture, tie up connections quickly, give them trivia, relate other events, and do so with enough freedom of the mind to be somewhat engaging at the same time…not just a drone reading and reading. They are loving it.

Since parents are [or should be] the primary educators of their children, this approach to catechesis would enable them to teach their own children at home. In our experience, Homeschooling parents in particular have found our approach and our curriculum to be useful, and the tests that we administered allowed for our parish DRE to track and measure the progress of students who are being taught by their parents at home.

Several times a year we suspended classes and had scheduled evenings of recollection for our catechists. We prayed, discussed ideas and teaching strategies, and offered Mass.

TECHNOLOGY
Technology is a tool that can be effectively employed in our teaching and catechizing. We have copyrighted the Heart of Catechesis program and have put it online so that anyone—DRE’s, catechists, parents, or even students—may access, store, and print out the Lesson Booklets and supplementary materials. Our work will be given freely, **without cost** [MT 10:8 and 1 COR 9:18]. It will be updated, refined, and amended with materials provided by teachers throughout the country who provide us with new ideas, insights, and projects for the kids. Eventually audio and video lectures and homilies may be incorporated on the website, together with catechetical games and songs to appeal to an even wider audience.

CONCLUSION
Whatever applications or appeal our use of technology may have, ultimately the success of our catechetical endeavor will depend on how effectively we have brought the souls entrusted to our care into the Presence of Our Lord…

Catechesis aims at putting “people…in communion …with Jesus Christ: only He can lead us to the love of the Father in the Spirit and make us share in the life of the Holy Trinity” [CCC #426 and CT #5].

Or, as Pope Francis recently observed:
“[T]he center of our Faith is not only a book, but a history of salvation and especially a Person, Jesus Christ, the Word of God made flesh [to Pontifical Biblical Comission, 2013].

Employing Christ-centered catechesis which begins with Benediction at the feet of Our Lord and continues into the classroom, together with the systematic memorization of a clear and consistent core of basic and foundational truths of our Faith—the Heart of Catechesis—will constitute the foundation of a New Catechesis which will enable us more effectively to prepare and perfect the heralds of the New Evangelization, in this generation…and the next.