

Relevant Ecclesial Documents Concerning Adult Faith Formation

Paul VI, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, December 8, 1975. All rights reserved.

This was a breakthrough document in many ways. It asserts that the Church exists to evangelize. It places catechesis within the overall movement of evangelization and acknowledges that the proclamation of the Gospel is done primarily by witness. It also encourages adapting evangelization to the language, signs, and symbols of people's lives. The key section on catechesis is found in #44:

A means of evangelization that must not be neglected is that of catechetical instruction. The intelligence, especially that of children and young people, needs to learn through systematic religious instruction the fundamental teachings, the living content of the truth which God has wished to convey to us and which the Church has sought to express in an ever richer fashion during the course of her long history. No one will deny that this instruction must be given to form patterns of Christian living and not to remain only notional. Truly the effort for evangelization will profit greatly—at the level of catechetical instruction given at church, in the schools, where this is possible, and in every case in Christian homes—if those giving catechetical instruction have suitable texts, updated with wisdom and competence, under the authority of the bishops. The methods must be adapted to the age, culture and aptitude of the persons concerned, they must seek always to fix in the memory, intelligence and heart the essential truths that must impregnate all of life. It is necessary above all to prepare good instructors—parochial catechists, teachers, parents—who are desirous of perfecting themselves in this superior art, which is indispensable and requires religious instruction. Moreover, without neglecting in any way the training of children, one sees that present conditions render ever more urgent catechetical instruction, under the form of the catechumenate, for innumerable young people and adults who, touched by grace, discover little by little the face of Christ and feel the need of giving themselves to Him.

John Paul II Apostolic Exhortation

***Catechesi Tradendae* (CT), October 16, 1979. All rights reserved.**

This document came out of the Fourth General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, which had been presided over by Paul VI the previous year. Two important sections excerpted here are the pope's emphasis on the need for an organic and systematic catechesis (#21) and the section specifically related to adult faith formation (#43).

21. In his closing speech at the fourth general assembly of the synod, Pope Paul VI rejoiced "to see how everyone drew attention to the absolute need for systematic catechesis, precisely because it is this reflective study of the Christian mystery that fundamentally distinguishes catechesis from all other ways of presenting the word of God."

In view of practical difficulties, attention must be drawn to some of the characteristics of this instruction:

- It must be systematic, not improvised but programmed to reach a precise goal;
- It must deal with essentials, without any claim to tackle all disputed questions or to transform itself into theological research or scientific exegesis;

- It must nevertheless be sufficiently complete, not stopping short at the initial proclamation of the Christian mystery such as we have in the kerygma;
- It must be an integral Christian initiation, open to all the other factors of Christian life.

I am not forgetting the interest of the many different occasions for catechesis connected with personal, family, social and ecclesial life—these occasions must be utilized—but I am stressing the need for organic and systematic Christian instruction, because of the tendency in various quarters to minimize its importance.

43. To continue the series of receivers of catechesis, I cannot fail to emphasize now one of the most constant concerns of the synod fathers, a concern imposed with vigor and urgency by present experiences throughout the world: I am referring to the central problem of the catechesis of adults. This is the principal form of catechesis, because it is addressed to persons who have the greatest responsibilities and the capacity to live the Christian message in its fully developed form. The Christian community cannot carry out a permanent catechesis without the direct and skilled participation of adults, whether as receivers or as promoters of catechetical activity. The world, in which the young are called to live and to give witness to the faith which catechesis seeks to deepen and strengthen, is governed by adults. The faith of these adults too should continually be enlightened, stimulated and renewed, so that it may pervade the temporal realities in their charge. Thus, for catechesis to be effective, it must be permanent, and it would be quite useless if it stopped short at the threshold of maturity, since catechesis, admittedly under another form, proves no less necessary for adults.

International Commission on English in the Liturgy

Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults, July 1, 1988. All rights reserved.

The RCIA has been cited in other major documents, e.g., *General Directory for Catechesis (GDC) #90*, as the model for all catechesis. Number 75 spells out the essential formation process that serves as the “model” for catechesis.

The Catechumenate is an extended period during which the candidates are given suitable pastoral formation and guidance, aimed at training them in the Christian life.¹ In this way, the dispositions manifested at their acceptance into the Catechumenate are brought to maturity. This is achieved in four ways:

1. A suitable catechesis is provided by priests or deacons, or by catechists and others of the faithful, planned to be gradual and complete in its coverage, accommodated to the liturgical years, and solidly supported by celebrations of the word. This catechesis leads the catechumens not only to an appropriate acquaintance with dogmas and precepts but also to a profound sense of the mystery of salvation in which they desire to participate.
2. As they become familiar with the Christian way of life and are helped by the example and support of sponsors, godparents, and the entire Christian community, the catechumens learn to turn more readily to God in prayer, to bear witness to the faith, in all things to keep their hopes set on Christ, to follow supernatural inspiration in their deeds, and to practice love of neighbor, even at the cost of self-renunciation. Thus formed, “the newly converted set out on a spiritual journey. Already sharing through faith in the mystery of Christ’s death and resurrection, they pass from the old to a new nature made perfect in Christ. Since this

transition brings with it a progressive change of outlook and conduct, it should become manifest by means of its social consequences and it should develop gradually during the period of the Catechumenate. Since the Lord in whom they believe is a sign of contradiction, the newly converted often experience divisions and separations, but they also taste the joy that God gives without measure.”²

3. The Church, like a mother, helps the catechumens on their journey by means of suitable liturgical rites, which purify the catechumens little by little and strengthen them with God’s blessing. Celebrations of the word of God are arranged for their benefit, and at Mass they may also take part with the faithful in the liturgy of the word, thus better preparing themselves for their eventual participation in the liturgy of the eucharist. Ordinarily, however, when they are present in the assembly of the faithful, they should be kindly dismissed before the liturgy of the eucharist begins (unless their dismissal would present practical or pastoral problems). For they must await their baptism, which will join them to God’s priestly people and empower them to participate in Christ’s new worship (see no. 67 for formularies of dismissal).

4. Since the Church’s life is apostolic, catechumens should also learn how to work actively with others to spread the Gospel and build up the Church by witness of their lives and by professing their faith.

1. See Vatican Council II, *Decree on the Church’s Missionary Activity, Ad Gentes*, #14.

2. *Ibid.*, no. 13.

International Council for Catechesis

***Adult Catechesis in the Christian Community: Some Principles and Guidelines*, 1990. All rights reserved.**

Although this document does not carry the same level of authority as either an apostolic exhortation or general directory, it nonetheless offers important guidance from the Vatican on adult faith formation. The following sections are especially notable.

21. Adults in the Church, that is, all Christian men and women, lay people, priests, and religious are people who have a right and an obligation to be catechized just like everyone else (*CT*, c. V; can. 217, 774; *Christifideles Laici* (Chr. L.) 34).

This reason does not derive from any kind of service which the adult Christian is called to render. It springs instead directly from the “seed” of faith planted within and which hopes to mature as the adult grows in age and responsibility. “When I was a child I used to talk like a child, think like a child, reason like a child. When I became a man I put childish ways aside” (1 Cor 13: 11).

Only by becoming an adult in the faith is one able to fulfill his or her adult duties toward others, as is required by the vocation given to each at baptism.

One must admit that in various communities, the formation of adults has been taken for granted or perhaps carried out in connection with certain events, not infrequently in an infantile way. Because certain external or traditional supports are sometimes lacking, a grave imbalance is created insofar as catechesis has devoted considerable attention to children while the same has not happened in the catechesis of young people and adults.

22. The need for personal formation is necessarily bound up with the role which adults assume in public life. They share with all Christians the task of witnessing to the Gospel

in words and deeds, but they do this with undeniable authority and in a specifically adult way. This is true in the family context in which many adults, precisely as parents or other relatives, become both by nature and grace the first and indispensable catechists of their children. Adults also serve as role models for young people who need to be confronted with and challenged by the faith of adults.

In the context of society, the role of adults is crucial in the workplace and in the academic, professional, civil, economic, political and cultural spheres, and wherever responsibility and power are exercised. This is the case because the believing adult is so often the only one who can introduce the leaven of the Kingdom, express the novelty and beauty of the Gospel, and demonstrate the will for change and liberation desired by Jesus Christ.

The simple, faith-filled actions by which adults give witness to the Gospel in these situations require a great effort on their part to inwardly appropriate what they are called to pass on to others in a convincing and credible way.

25. In summary, in order for the Good News of the Kingdom to penetrate all the various layers of the human family, it is crucial that every Christian play an active part in the coming of the Kingdom. The work of each will be coordinated with and complementary to the contribution of everyone else, according to the different degrees of responsibility each one has. All of this naturally requires adults to play a primary role. Hence, it is not only legitimate, but necessary, to acknowledge that 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.

69. Adult catechesis necessarily aims at making the adult a member of and a participant in the community. This means that adults must not only know the community, but must also actively participate in its various faith expressions and accept some form of responsibility for community life. For this reason, the building of small communities or ecclesial groups is conducive to the strengthening of adult catechesis (cf. CT 24).

Congregation for the Clergy

General Directory for Catechesis, 1997. All rights reserved.

The GDC provides a substantial number of directives on the catechesis of adults. And given the amount of material it devotes to the topic, it is difficult to adequately represent here the key points. Still, paragraph 175 stands out for its description of the major tasks of adult faith formation.

175. So as to respond to the more profound needs of our time, adult catechesis must systematically 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 difficulties, doubts, misunderstandings, prejudices and objections of today. It must introduce adults to a faith-filled reading of Sacred Scripture and the practice of prayer. A fundamental service to adult catechesis is given by the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* and by those adult catechisms based on it by the particular Churches. In particular, the tasks of adult catechesis are:

– to promote formation and development of life in the Risen Christ by adequate means: pedagogy of the sacraments, retreats, spiritual direction . . . ;

- *to educate toward a correct evaluation of the socio-cultural changes of our societies in the light of faith:* thus the Christian community is assisted in discerning true values in our civilization, as well as its dangers, and in adopting appropriate attitudes;
- *to clarify current religious and moral questions,* that is, those questions which are encountered by the men and women of our time: for example, public and private morality with regard to social questions and the education of future generations;
- *to clarify the relationship between temporal actions and ecclesial action,* by demonstrating mutual distinctions and implications and thus due interaction; to this end, the social doctrine of the Church is an integral part of adult catechesis;
- *to develop the rational foundations of the faith:* that the right understanding of the faith and of the truths to be believed are in conformity with the demands of reason and the Gospel is always relevant; it is therefore necessary to promote effectively the pastoral aim of Christian thought and culture: this helps to overcome certain forms of fundamentalism as well as subjective and arbitrary interpretations;
- *to encourage adults to assume responsibility for the Church's mission and to be able to give Christian witness in society:* The adult is assisted to discover, evaluate and activate what he [or she] has received by nature and grace, both in the Christian community and by living in human society; in this way, he [or she] will be able to overcome the dangers of standardization and of anonymity which are particularly dominant in some societies of today and which lead to loss of identity and lack of appreciation for the resources and qualities of the individual.

United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB)

Our Hearts Were Burning Within Us: A Pastoral Plan for Adult Faith Formation in the United States, 1999. All rights reserved.

This bishops' statement presents an overview of the ministry of adult faith formation and identifies specific action steps to make it a top priority in parishes throughout the country. Excerpted here are several paragraphs on the priority of adult faith formation.

39. We are convinced that the energy and resources we devote to adult faith formation will strengthen and invigorate all the charisms that adults receive and the activities they undertake, in the Church and in society, to serve the Gospel of Christ and the people of today. Every Church ministry will be energized through a dynamic ministry of adult catechesis.

40. Adult faith formation also benefits children and youth. An adult community whose faith is well-formed and lively will more effectively pass that faith on to the next generation. Moreover, the witness of adults actively continuing their own formation shows children and youth that growth in faith is lifelong and does not end upon reaching adulthood.¹⁴

41. In addition, adult faith formation should serve as the point of reference for catechesis for other age groups. It ought to be "the organizing principle, which gives coherence to the various catechetical programs offered by a particular Church."¹⁵ Maturity of faith is the intent of all catechesis from the earliest years. Thus, all catechesis is geared to a lifelong deepening of faith in Christ. How necessary, then, that the catechetical ministry with adults set an example of the highest quality and vitality.

14. *Catechesi Tradendae*, no. 43.

15. *GDC*, nos. 59, 171, 275.

United States Conference of Catholic Bishops

National Directory for Catechesis, 2005. All rights reserved.

The *NDC* is the latest authoritative statement from the U.S. bishops on the ministry of catechesis. Excerpted here are the recommended methodological principles for adult faith formation (*NDC* 48.A).

Several principles should guide the selection of effective methods for adult catechesis:

- Since adults “have a right and a duty to bring to maturity the seed of faith sown in them by God,”⁶¹⁰ they should identify their catechetical needs and, with the help of those responsible for religious education, plan ways to meet those needs.
- Those responsible for adult catechesis should identify the principal characteristics of adult Catholics, develop catechetical objectives based on those characteristics, and design a catechetical plan to meet those objectives.
- Those responsible for adult catechesis should determine the most effective methods and choose formats and models that represent a “variety of forms: systematic and occasional, individual and community, organized and spontaneous.”⁶¹¹
- Those responsible for catechesis should identify the members of the community who can serve as catechists for adults and should provide for their training, formation, and spiritual enrichment.
- Adult catechesis should respect the experiences of adults and make use of their personal experiences, skills, and talents.
- Adult catechesis should be based on the circumstances of those to whom it is addressed: their situations as adults; their racial, cultural, religious, social, and economic conditions; their experiences and problems; and their educational and spiritual maturity.
- Adult catechesis should recognize the specific conditions of lay Catholics and consistently call them to holiness and to “seek[ing] the Kingdom of God by engaging in temporal affairs and ordering them according to the plan of God.”⁶¹²
- Adult catechesis should involve the whole community so that it may be a welcoming and supportive environment.
- Adult catechesis requires a comprehensive, multifaceted, and coordinated approach and a variety of learning activities, such as participation in liturgical experiences, Scripture reading and study, retreats and experiences of prayer, family or home-centered activities, ecumenical dialogues, small-group experiences, large-group experiences, and individual activities.⁶¹³
- As much as possible, adult catechesis should involve adults themselves in the catechetical process so that they can teach and learn from one another.

610. *GDC*, no. 173.

611. *General Catechetical Directory*, no. 19.

612. *Christifideles Laici*, no. 9.

613. Cf. *Our Hearts Were Burning Within Us*, nos. 100–112.