

A CATHOLIC PERSPECTIVE

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***‘Laboratories of Dialogue’*: Forming Adults in Faith**

by Richard Olson

Dialogue as Formation

“The Church must enter into dialogue with the world in which it lives.”ⁱ


Every day parents in Ontario send their children into our Catholic schools. The Bishops of Ontario affirm that “all those who work in Catholic education are called upon to reflect, in a faithful and discerning fashion, God’s presence in this world.”ⁱⁱ

At Pentecost, the first disciples were empowered with the gift of the Holy Spirit to go out and proclaim the good news of what God has done in Christ Jesus. The Holy Spirit is still at work in the hearts of students and teachers alike, igniting a flame of passion for a share in the divine life promised since the foundation of the world, recounted in the unfolding story of salvation history, and gifted to us through the Sacraments of the Church.

In their pastoral letter - *Renewing the Promise* (2018), the Bishops remind us that our schools are privileged places where young people encounter the person of Jesus Christ. If Catholic educators are to effectively accompany children, they must first be fed and formed themselves.

While the necessity for this formation has intensified in an increasingly secular dominant culture, the

approach to it must be informed by a spirit of dialogue and encounter. A “‘dialogical style’ [is needed] to make more visible the face of the Son who, as with the Samaritan woman at the well, stops to begin a dialogue with every human being in order to lead him or her with gentleness to the discovery of the living water.”ⁱⁱⁱ



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Like the Samaritan woman, we too are seekers after grace, longing to be held in the divine gaze that claims each of us as beloved children of God.

The question for Catholic education today is:

How do we support the great task of ongoing faith formation for adults who accompany children in Catholic schools?

Laboratories for Formation

In its new *Directory for Catechesis*, the Church acknowledges the need for ongoing faith formation for all the baptized that is intentionally dialogical:

[C]atechesis is an authentic ‘laboratory’ of *dialogue* because in the depths of every single person it encounters the vivacity and complexity, the desires and inquires . . . of the contemporary world.”^{iv}

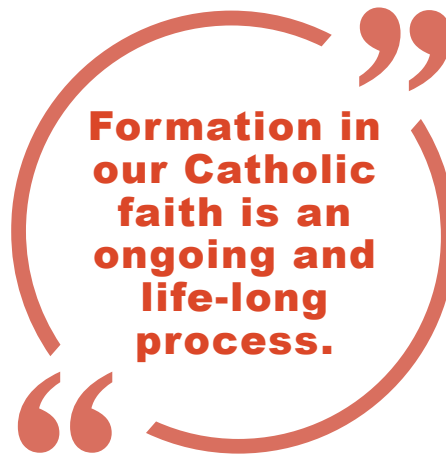
Additionally, the *Directory* re-emphasizes the importance of the *kerygma* or first proclamation that attracts, emboldens and empowers all the baptized who are called to be missionary disciples.

We can think of the *kerygma* as our 30 second elevator speech that gives the reason for our faith. John 3:16, often held up on placards at large sporting events, says, “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.” (NRSV) Pope Francis has expressed the *kerygma* this way: “Jesus Christ loves you; he gave his life to save you; and now he is living at your side every day to enlighten, strengthen and free you.”^v

Formation in our Catholic faith tradition is an ongoing and life-long process for everyone. The Holy Spirit is the impetus and initiator of this process because God always gets there first. God is “all in all” as St. Paul reminds us (1 Cor. 15:28). So, the Holy Spirit “helps the baptized person to take shape, which means unveiling [their] deepest identity which is that of being a son [or daughter] of God in profound communion with [their] brothers [and sisters].”^{vi}

The *Directory for Catechesis* reminds us that the transformation that results from ongoing formation in the faith is a depth experience that profoundly touches

our freedom, and excites in us joyful discipleship, yet this work of formation cannot be reduced to simple instruction, or moral exhortation, or to a specific pastoral technique.^{vii} Formation for transformation requires the openness of the participant to the Spirit of God who leads us to a “living encounter with the Lord who transforms life”.^{viii} So, there is no one program of formation that will meet the needs of every Catholic educator who accompanies children in their journey to deeper faith.



The goal of formation of Catholic educators is to help them understand that all the baptized are called to be missionary disciples, active participants in evangelization, and so enabled by the Church to communicate the Gospel and to accompany and educate believers in the faith.^{ix}

The Essentials of Formation

To accomplish the goals of ongoing formation that is relevant and responsive to the needs of Catholic educators, there are some essential criteria that will inform how we set the context for formation experiences:

- *The warm embrace of hospitality:* The good news we proclaim is a source of joy, and that joy will express itself through the welcoming spaces we create for rich conversations and experiences of faith.
- *Dialogue over judgement:* Adults bring a rich diversity of lived experiences, family dynamics and perspectives. As Pope Francis has often reminded us, we should lead with mercy because it is a beautiful and powerfully attractive force. Our stance should be dialogical and non-judgemental. He expresses it as the responsibility of the evangelizer to foster this environment in the *Joy of the Gospel*: All this demands on the part of the evangelizer certain attitudes which foster openness to the message:

approachability, readiness for dialogue, patience, a warmth and welcome which is non-judgmental.^x

- *Respect for each one's dignity and freedom:* Ultimately the responsibility for discipleship falls to each of us. Each of us must choose it. Our shared goal is mature discipleship that seeks what is needed in communion with the living Body of Christ. The gospel is always invitation, never coercion.

- *Awareness of the conditions of life:* Programming must be arranged in a manner that will be accessible to working professionals. At times, this will include virtual experiences, recognizing that “virtual reality cannot . . . replace the spiritual, sacramental, and ecclesial reality experienced in direct encounter among persons”.^{xi}

- *Invitations to ‘come and see’ or ‘come and listen’:* Inviting adults to discussions of issues of concern or interest - be it moral, socio-political, economic, or environmental - allows for reflection on these topics from a theological perspective.

- *Openness to questions:* Adults who have not had sufficient opportunity to seek answers to the questions that trouble their hearts will not engage in the life of the Church that makes Christ present to the world. Formation experiences must be designed to field questions and offer honest answers that speak to the wisdom of the Catholic Tradition.

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Once the context is set for ongoing formation experiences, the content of the dialogues must be addressed. Adults bring a wealth of life experience, complex questions, and a desire to be heard. They will arrive as who they are, seeking what it is they need at that particular time. Formation will be designed to accompany them in the following ways:

Dialogue with Scripture: There will be opportunities to explore Sacred Scripture as the divine revelation of God’s Word to the world. The Bible is the story of our salvation, and its narrative quality must be preserved for all those being accompanied on the journey of faith so that they can see how their life story is connected to the larger story of God reaching into our history, especially in the person of Jesus.

Dialogue with the Church’s Teaching: Formation programs must include a dialogue with the teaching authority of the Church. Some familiarity with the Magisterium and its core documents – those of Vatican II, the Catechism of the Catholic Church, some of the major papal encyclicals and exhortations – will help participants ground themselves in the wisdom of our Tradition which will clarify and purify their faith as they enter more deeply into communion with the Church.

Dialogue with Mystery: Formation programs and activities will include experiences of prayer and liturgy to help participants to listen attentively to what God is saying to their lives, to offer praise and thanksgiving for graces received, and to respond joyfully as members of the one Body. Opportunities for prayer should be varied and may include experiences of individual and communal prayer, Christian meditation, contemplative prayer, as well as traditional and beloved prayers of the Church. To become missionary disciples who will be authentic witnesses of Jesus for children in schools, Catholic educators require immersion in the sacramental life of the Church, especially Eucharist.

Dialogue with Neighbours: Finally, formation programs or activities should be grounded in concrete service to others and committed to works of justice,

aligned with the social teaching of the Church. Formation seeks the transformation of the human person for engagement with the world. In recent times, the need for reconciliation with Indigenous peoples, for environmental stewardship, for alleviating the suffering of the poor, are all clarion calls to missionary disciples who can put flesh on their faith, who can be Christ's hands, eyes, and compassion in this world.

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Formation for Evangelization

The culture of a Catholic school is formed by its prayer life and liturgies, its witness to acts of charity and justice, and its faithfulness to rigorous

religious education. In all these dimensions, Catholic educators walk alongside students, to help form them in the faith that will sustain them through life's struggles and troubles and seed them for a life of service to their neighbour.^{xii}

In this ministry of service, educators evangelize and are evangelized. They catechize and are catechized. This is the dynamic dance that is animated by the Holy Spirit in the life of the Church and in our Catholic schools. As partners in the great mission of Catholic education, let us commit ourselves to seeking and providing rich experiences for ongoing formation in the faith for all those who serve, work, and teach in our Catholic schools.

Reflection:

When reflecting on your activities and programs to support ongoing faith formation, which of the essentials of formation do you need to address more purposefully?

In what ways are your activities and programs for faith formation intentionally dialogical?

References

- i Pontifical Council for Promotion of the New Evangelization. Directory for Catechesis, 2020, paragraph 53
- ii *Renewing the Promise*, A Pastoral Letter for Catholic Education, 2018, page 3
- iii Pontifical Council for Promotion of the New Evangelization. Directory for Catechesis, 2020, paragraph 54
- iv Ibid. paragraph 54
- v *Evangelii Gaudium*, 2013, paragraph 164
- vi Pontifical Council for Promotion of the New Evangelization. Directory for Catechesis, 2020, paragraph 131
- vii Ibid. paragraph 131
- viii Ibid. 2020, paragraph 6
- ix Ibid. paragraph 132
- x *Evangelii Gaudium*, 2013, paragraph 165
- xi Pontifical Council for Promotion of the New Evangelization. Directory for Catechesis, 2020, paragraph 217
- xii For a more on this topic, see *The Catholic Teacher as Catechist* (Novalis, 2021)