

MISSION FIELD

A Framework for the Transformation
of Faith Formation Structures



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INTRODUCTION

You are likely reading this because the Lord has granted you the gift of holy discontent. Somewhere in your heart you feel the call to imagine that there has to be a better way to form the next generation, that you cannot continue to do the same thing, year after year, hoping for a different outcome. You are not alone in your discontent. The Holy Spirit is stirring the hearts of many leaders in the Church to consider a different way forward, one that may feel unfamiliar to us, but in fact is deeply rooted in our tradition. Transformation is hard, but it is necessary. Pope Francis, in very pointed manner, directs our efforts:

If something should rightly disturb us and trouble our consciences, it is the fact that so many of our brothers and sisters are living without the strength, light and consolation born of friendship with Jesus Christ, without a community of faith to support them, without meaning and a goal in life. More than by fear of going astray, my hope is that we will be moved by the fear of remaining shut up within structures which give us a false sense of security, within rules which make us harsh judges, within habits which make us feel safe, while at our door people are starving and Jesus does not tire of saying to us: “Give them something to eat” (Mk 6:37).¹

While there are many ready for renewal in this area, there are many who are not. I often hear: “We are going to keep doing what we have always done and this time it is going to work.” What I once heard as an out of touch and disengaged response, I now hear as a desperate cry to regain what once was. Behind this response is the feeling of: “I don’t know any other way and I am afraid to lose what we have left.” We all want the same outcome, but we differ in how it should be accomplished. We are called to be grateful for the gifts of the past, prayerfully discern an effective plan for the present, and hold on to hope for the future.

¹ Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, accessed April 28, 2022, Vatican.va, 49.

We have only really seen one approach to faith formation, the traditional drop-off classroom model. What we assumed to be primary, the classroom, was in fact only ever supplementary. If it were primary, it should have continued to stand without supplementary support. It has become manifestly clear, from the research and our experience, that this model no longer produces the fruit it once did. So what then is primary? Family life, led by parents. This has always been the primary means of passing on the faith to the next generation. As this primary institution has diminished in vitality, so too has the classroom's ability to support and deepen a lived faith. The work of our era is to rebuild the Church one family at a time by restoring parents to their rightful place as the primary educators of their children.² So much about our world and culture have changed, while our methods have not.

The purpose of this booklet is to provide a tool to help revision parish faith formation structures. It is hard to imagine making a change when we may have not experienced or seen another way. We will explore the use of the who, what, when, where, why, and how framework to honestly evaluate our current practices and implement the vision of the Church for faith formation in this time. A framework is meant to be filled in, just like a framed house without finishes is not complete. This is not meant to be a complete guide, but rather a starting point, providing a horizon toward which we can grow. Our assumptions inform our strategies. We will question our assumptions and build a foundation to make the needed changes courageously. We are invited to think outside the box, while remaining in our tradition.

The contemporary mission field is not far off, it is in fact right next door. Our mission field is the family. If the family is the most basic building block of the Church and society, then it is the place we must invest. Pope Saint John Paul II reminds us: “the

² “Since they have conferred life on their children, parents have the original, primary and inalienable right to educate them; hence they must be acknowledged as the first and foremost educators of their children” (Holy See, *Charter of the Rights of the Family*, accessed October 14, 2022, [Vatican.va](https://www.vatican.va), Article 5.)

future of humanity passes by way of the family.”³ Now is the time to transform parish faith formation structures from being church centric - family supported, to family centric - church supported. It is essential for pastors and directors to be aligned with a common vision. You are coworkers in the mission field and to implement a structure change at the parish level requires this partnership. To that end we hope that both the pastor and director work together through this tool, have honest and meaningful conversations, and make a plan that will best suit your community. You may also consider gathering a group of parents and other parish leaders who are invested in formation renewal to read and discuss with you.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- What was your experience of faith formation growing up? What has changed since?
- How do you feel about the faith formation process you are currently offering?
- What do you see that is producing fruit and what is not?
- What seems the most overwhelming moving in a new direction?

³ John Paul II, *Familiaris Consortio*, accessed June 15, 2022, Vatican.va, 75.

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WHO

We begin with the question of “who.” Who is the subject of our ministry in faith formation? We may be tempted to immediately answer “children,” which is natural since, for as long as we can recall, they have been the subject of our efforts, but should they be? An honest question to ask ourselves is: “What do I remember from my first Communion preparation?” When I ask this question to groups of leaders, most of their responses focus on an experience they had, what they wore, or how they felt during the day of. Seldom do people recall any of the systematic formation they received by a well meaning catechist on the essential teaching regarding the Eucharist. We spend an incredible amount of time, money, and energy to form catechists to teach systematic realities to children that have little capacity on their own to integrate the material into a lived praxis. The sociological research points us to this essential reality:

The single, most powerful causal influence on the religious lives of American teenagers and young adults is the religious lives of their parents. Not their peers, not the media, not their youth group leaders or clergy, not their religious school teachers. Myriad studies show that, beyond a doubt, the parents of American youth play the leading role in shaping the character of their religious and spiritual lives, even well after they leave home and often for the rest of their lives.⁴

Following from these data, just imagine what would happen if we were to invest the same effort in the formation of parents as we do in the formation of children.

The formation of parents simply is the formation of children. Parents decide what is and is not important for their children by

⁴ Amy Adamczyk and Christian Smith. *Handing Down the Faith: How Parents Pass Their Religion on to the Next Generation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021), 1.

what they say, but more importantly what they do. Children will rarely be what they cannot see. If we want children to come to Mass for their second Communion, their parents must decide that they want to live in communion, that it is important to them. The new *Directory for Catechesis* [henceforth: *DC*] directs us to this end:

Believing parents, with their daily example of life, have the most effective capacity to transmit the beauty of the Christian faith to their children. “Enabling families to take up their role as active agents of the family apostolate calls for ‘an effort at evangelization and catechesis inside the family.’”⁵

This seems to be what Jesus envisioned when he gave Peter his directives at the end of the Gospel of John.⁶ Jesus asks Peter if he loves him three different times and then proceeds to give Peter his vision for formation in the Church. Jesus said: “feed my lambs, tend my sheep, and feed my sheep.” It seems clear here that two-thirds of Peter’s pastoral efforts should be focused on caring for the sheep, the parents, and one-third of his time on caring for the lambs, the children. It is worth noting that at least for the first part of their lives, sheep are the ones who feed lambs. If we tend and feed the sheep, then they will naturally feed their lambs.

Our focus then must be on forming and equipping parents to actively live out their call to be the primary educators of faith for their children. The recent Church documents have been clear, adult faith formation is “the axis around which revolves the catechesis of childhood and adolescence as well as that of old age.”⁷ This is an evocative image. Imagine a wheel with the axis at the center. When the axis is strong and centered, the wheel

5 Pontifical Council for the Promotion of the New Evangelization. *Directory for Catechesis* (Washington, DC: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2020), 124.

6 John 21:15-19 (All Biblical citations throughout this text will be taken from the New American Bible Revised Edition, NABRE).

7 Congregation for the Clergy, *General Directory for Catechesis*, accessed June 30, 2022, [Vatican.va](https://www.vatican.va), 275.

rolls easily. If it becomes weak or off centered the entire wheel will begin to oscillate, eventually destroying everything around it. This is also what has happened to our faith formation structures since most churches offer little to no adult formation beyond classes for Christian initiation. If we prioritize the formation of adults, especially parents, all of our other formative efforts will roll smoothly forward as well.

In previous generations we assumed parents had an adequate formation in the faith that upheld the rest of our formative processes. It is clear now that the majority of parents who bring their children to faith formation have little to no active faith life and an elementary formation at best. One of the most significant and honest appraisals of our current situation can be found in Patrick Shea's book, *From Christendom to Apostolic Mission*, in which he writes:

We are dealing with the first culture in history that was once deeply Christian but that by a slow and thorough process has been consciously ridding itself of its Christian basis. Our society is full of many including those baptized and raised with some exposure to faith who believe that they have seen enough of Christianity to see that it has little to offer them. We are therefore not attempting to make converts from pagans; we are attempting to bring back to the Church those knowingly or unknowingly in the grasp of apostasy, a different and more difficult challenge. C. S. Lewis once described this difference as that between a man wooing a young maiden and a man winning a cynical divorcee back to her previous marriage.⁸

We are confronted with a new challenge, one that will not respond to arguments from authority. What we are experiencing is a purpose gap. It exists because there is a distinct gap between what people desire and hope for in their lives, and what is being

8 University of Mary and Monsignor James P. Shea, *From Christendom to Apostolic Mission: Pastoral Strategies for an Apostolic Age* (North Dakota, University of Mary Press, 2020), 7.

offered by our ministries. James K. A. Smith, in his book *Desiring the Kingdom*, reminds us that people are drawn to and invest in what they love and consider to contribute to a good life:

Our identity is shaped by what we ultimately love or what we love as ultimate—what, at the end of the day, gives us a sense of meaning, purpose, understanding, and orientation to our being-in-the-world. What we desire or love ultimately is a (largely implicit) vision of what we hope for, what we think the good life looks like. This vision of the good life shapes all kinds of actions and decisions and habits that we undertake, often without our thinking about it.⁹

We have to hold up faith as something of value that meets a felt need in the parents we are serving. We have to become a bridge of faith.¹⁰ This gap can be closed, but we will need to take a different approach, one that focuses on rebuilding trust and a partnership in this great task of forming others in the good news that leads to a good life.

Smith also invites us to consider the fundamental nature of “who” we are, because behind every pedagogy is a philosophical anthropology. He explains:

In more pedestrian terms, behind every constellation of educational practices is a set of assumptions about the nature of human persons—about the kinds of creatures we are. Thus a pedagogy that thinks about education as primarily a matter of disseminating information tends to assume that human beings are primarily “thinking things” and cognitive machines. Ideas and concepts are at the heart of such pedagogies because they are aimed primarily at the head. Because of the intellectualist philosophical anthropology that is operative here, the body tends to drop

⁹ James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom (Cultural Liturgies): Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* (Michigan, Baker Academic, 2009), 26.

¹⁰ Private conversation with Steven Serafin, (August 11, 2022).

out of the picture. There is little attention to the nitty-gritty details of material practices and the role that they play in education. In contrast, a pedagogy that understands education as formation usually assumes that human beings are a different kind of animal. It's not that we don't think, but rather that our thinking and cognition arise from a more fundamental, precognitive orientation to the world. And that precognitive or prerational orientation to the world is shaped and primed by very material, embodied practices. Thus such a pedagogy is much more attuned to the formative role of ritual.¹¹

Perhaps we are called to help others embrace the most fundamental reality of who we are, composite unities of material bodies and rational spiritual souls, made in the image of God. Our pedagogies must then include the formation of the whole person, not just of the mind. We will look more into this as we discuss the intersection between the “who” and “what.”

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- How would you describe the families you are serving?
 - How do you get to know your families and do your families know each other?
 - To what extent is adult faith formation the axis of all other formation at your parish?
 - What type of opportunities do you currently offer for parent engagement? How do you feel about being called to form parents?
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¹¹ Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 27.

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WHAT

Our next area to consider is the “what.” One thing the Church does not lack is an abundance of material on the “what” of our faith. With there being so much content out there, the question we must ask ourselves is: What of it is essential and relevant to the “who” that is in front of us? We may want to default to what we know and are comfortable teaching, lists of systematic tidbits like the Ten Commandments and seven sacraments, which are the focus in spiral and basal textbooks. On the surface it might look like the problem is that people don’t know enough and if they only knew more of the right thing, then it would lead to right faith and right behavior. If that were true, then every Catholic school would be turning out disciples at an incredible rate, which is clearly not the case. What then do we need to focus on? I would posit that we need to rebuild a sacramental imagination in the hearts and minds of the faithful. Phil Davignon hones in on an important reality:

People's behavior is not driven primarily by what they know and believe but by what they love and imagine as good. This is not to say that beliefs are unimportant, but that what gives shape to human action is primarily one's imagination and enduring dispositions (*habitus*) rather than mere assent to doctrine.¹²

The Church has relied on this for centuries, so much so that when the cultural river changed direction in the 1970’s we were not ready for the level of intentionality it would require to maintain our unique worldview. Charles Taylor, in this book *The Secular Age*, traces the philosophical deterioration of the sacramental worldview. In short, we went from living in an enchanted reality, where the physical world was penetrated by the influence of the metaphysical world, to an unenchanted reality, where all that is said to be real is what can be empirically verified. The very content

12 Phil Davignon, “Misunderstanding the Rise of the Nones,” *Church Life Journal* <https://churchlifejournal.nd.edu/articles/misunderstanding-the-rise-of-the-nones/> (accessed October 11, 2022).

of our faith and its intelligibility relies on forming people's imaginations to see the whole of their lives through the lens of an enchanted sacramental worldview. Without this essential framework, there becomes no place to hang any systematic teaching. We have to rebuild a sacramental imagination not by just teaching the right things, but also by doing the right things consistently. "Our worldview is more a matter of the imagination than the intellect, and the imagination runs off the fuel of images that are channeled by the senses."¹³ We will dive deeper into the "how" in another chapter, but I think the critical area we need to spend our time in formation on is mystery.

We need to rekindle an awareness of mystery. When we stop long enough to look up or look within we are confronted with the grandeur of mystery. In our world today mystery is seen as a problem to be solved, rather than a reality to behold. In the Christian tradition "mystery refers to something visible that was previously invisible."¹⁴ Mystery is invitational and relational, it does not allow itself to be mastered. Mystery in us is messy and beautiful, not something to be fixed, but rather redeemed. Mystery is beyond us, but it's also within us. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* [henceforth: CCC] teaches us:

The Greek word *mysterion* was translated into Latin by two terms: *mysterium* and *sacramentum*. In later usage the term *sacramentum* emphasizes the visible sign of the hidden reality of salvation which was indicated by the term *mysterium*. In this sense, Christ himself is the mystery of salvation: "For there is no other mystery of God, except Christ." The saving work of his holy and sanctifying humanity is the sacrament of salvation, which is revealed and active in the Church's sacraments (which the Eastern Churches also call "the holy mysteries"). The seven sacraments are the signs and instruments by which the Holy Spirit spreads the grace of Christ the head throughout the Church which is his Body.

¹³ Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 57.

¹⁴ Father Harrison Ayre, *Mysterion: The Revelatory Power of the Sacramental Worldview* (Massachusetts, Pauline Books & Media, 2021), 22.

The Church, then, both contains and communicates the invisible grace she signifies. It is in this analogical sense, that the Church is called a "sacrament."¹⁵

All of formation can be understood in the light of mystery, for the goal of formation is to spend eternity with Mystery itself. I have created a diagram called the *Hierarchy of Formation*, which was inspired by Maslow's *Hierarchy of Needs*. As a pyramid, it is built from the bottom up and represents the sequence for formation in mystery. It is not meant to be linear or compartmental, but rather ever expanding. The more robust the base becomes, the more what is above can be supported. The converse is also true, without the base as a foundation the higher realities have little to stand on. While you look at each layer you are invited to evaluate how your current processes stack up.



¹⁵ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, accessed October 5, 2022, Vatican.va, 774.

EMBRACE MYSTERY

Most of the questions we face are rooted in anthropological errors that affect the deepest parts of our identity. We have forgotten who we are, but more importantly whose we are. To be human is to be made in the image of God, who is a Trinity of Persons, who is love, and who is Mystery itself. We too then are made to live in a communion of persons with God and one another, to live in love and out of love, and embrace the mystery of who we are in him. When our image of God is clear we too see ourselves rightly. Through authentic human relationships we reawaken a sense of who we are and are opened up to an encounter with the living God. We regain trust through building relationships that remind others that they are not problems, but mysteries whom God is actively pursuing. We have to earn the right to proclaim the Gospel by showing it at work in the way we love one another. This is the work of pre-evangelization. An adequate theological anthropology, knowing who we are in God, forms the most sure foundation for formation.

ENCOUNTER MYSTERY

We now can facilitate an encounter with the mystery of God. We may hope that our people have had a personal encounter with Jesus Christ, but the reality is that the majority have not. This does not mean they don't desire to or are closed off to a relationship with him, they likely have never been invited. This is the work of the *kerygma*, the basic proclamation of the Gospel. We present the mystery of Christ, who invites a response. It is simply a meeting of mysteries. The *DC* says it best:

We must not think that in catechesis the *kerygma* gives way to a supposedly more 'solid' formation. Nothing is more solid, profound, secure, meaningful and wisdom-filled than that initial proclamation. All Christian formation consists of entering more deeply into the *kerygma*, which is reflected in and constantly illumines, the work of

catechesis, thereby enabling us to understand more fully the significance of every subject which the latter treats.¹⁶

KNOW MYSTERY

Once we encounter Christ we will be drawn by a desire to better know him and all he has revealed about the Father and the Spirit. This is the work of creedal catechesis, an unfolding of the essential elements of our faith contained in the Creed. What we are hoping to lead people to is a biblical knowing of God that goes far beyond an intellectual knowledge, rooted deeply in intimacy with the mystery that is infinitely knowable. “In the Bible, knowing God is no theoretical knowledge, rather, it is a drenching of the entire being with inward understanding of what God is. This knowledge is peace in God, participation in God's peace.”¹⁷ The *DC* guides us in this effort:

Initiatory catechesis is at the service of the profession of faith. Those who have already met Jesus Christ feel the growing desire to get to know him more intimately, expressing a first inclination toward the Gospel. In the Christian community catechesis, together with the liturgical ceremonies, works of charity, and experience of fraternity, “initiates them in knowledge of faith and apprenticeship in the Christian life, thereby promoting a spiritual journey which brings about ‘a progressive change in outlook and morals’ (AG 13).”¹⁸

CELEBRATE MYSTERY

Once we know who God is and have developed a living relationship with him, we now have a proper foundation to celebrate this grace. For Catholics, sacraments are the most amazing gifts, but they are not magic. They require preparation and readiness to properly

¹⁶ *DC* Preface.

¹⁷ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Light of the Word* (California, Ignatius Press, 1993), 15.

¹⁸ *DC* 34.

celebrate. We often want to start here, but it is like taking someone to a birthday party of a person they do not know and have little understanding of what a birthday party is in the first place. We have to move away from a merely transactional approach to an authentically relational and experiential formation. Sacraments cause the effect of what they signify. If we are not seeing the effects of the sacraments lived out in the people who receive them, it can be an indication to us that the recipients were not properly disposed to receive them. We will come back to this in greater detail in the next chapter. The CCC aptly reminds us:

This is the meaning of the Church's affirmation that the sacraments act *ex opere operato* (literally: "by the very fact of the action's being performed"), i.e., by virtue of the saving work of Christ, accomplished once for all. It follows that "the sacrament is not wrought by the righteousness of either the celebrant or the recipient, but by the power of God." From the moment that a sacrament is celebrated in accordance with the intention of the Church, the power of Christ and his Spirit acts in and through it, independently of the personal holiness of the minister. Nevertheless, the fruits of the sacraments also depend on the disposition of the one who receives them.¹⁹

LIVE MYSTERY

When "we live and move and have our being"²⁰ in Jesus, he will guide us in living according to his commands. Living as mystery is our response to the great love he has shown us. Most of the moral life is foreign to the sensibilities of the culture today. To say "no" to our fallen humanity is only possible by the grace God gives us to do so. We are called to accompany people from the mindset of an obligatory faith towards a dynamic of wanting to live for the Lord by responding to his call. The *DC* reminds us that this is possible not when we are pushed by requirements, but rather drawn by love:

¹⁹ CCC 1128.

²⁰ Acts 17:28.

Catechesis has the task of making the heart of every Christian resound with the call to live a new life in keeping with the dignity of children of God received in Baptism and with the life of the Risen One that is communicated through the sacraments. This task consists in showing that the response to the lofty vocation to holiness (cf. LG 40) is a filial way of life that is capable of bringing every situation back to the way of truth and happiness that is Christ. In this sense, catechesis instructs the believer in following the Lord according to the dispositions described in the Beatitudes (Mt 5: 1-12), which manifest his very life.²¹

PRAY MYSTERY

Praying mystery is the way we sustain and deepen a relationship with God throughout the whole of our lives. It is also the place we are drawn into a deeper understanding of the mystery. The *DC* invites us to see prayer's relationship to the entire formation process:

Catechesis has the task of educating the believer for prayer and in prayer, developing the contemplative dimension of Christian experience. It is necessary to teach him to pray with Jesus Christ and like him: "To learn to pray with Jesus is to pray with the same sentiments with which he turned to the Father: adoration, praise, thanksgiving, filial confidence, supplication and awe for his glory. All of these sentiments are reflected in the Our Father, the prayer which Jesus taught his disciples and which is the model of all Christian prayer [. . .] When catechesis is permeated by a climate of prayer, the assimilation of the entire Christian life reaches its summit."²²

This schema follows the structure of the *CCC* and the catechumenal process. "This mystery, then, requires that the faithful believe in

²¹ *DC* 83.

²² *DC* 86.

it, that they celebrate it, and that they live from it in a vital and personal relationship with the living and true God.”²³ There is a great freedom in realizing that all of our efforts in formation can be united along a common process led by mystery.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- How does your process meet the current realities of families?
- Where do you begin your process? Do you jump right into catechesis or do you begin with getting to know your people in an authentically human way?
- How do you focus on drawing people into a relationship with the Triune God?
- How do you equip parents with the right tools and experiences to confidently take up the role of being the primary educator of their children?

²³ CCC 2258.

[illegible]

WHEN

We now consider the question of “when.” When do we make the change? When should someone receive a sacrament? When should faith formation happen? Before we answer these questions ask yourself: When is the last time you heard someone say they had a conversion experience at your parish? Your answer to this question should help answer the first question. If it has been a long time since you have heard of a conversion being brought about by a structure in place at your parish, it is time to consider renewing the structure. Many leaders have prioritized maintaining the status quo over renewing their processes along a missional horizon. This may be the last generation where non-practicing people bring their children to the parish to receive the sacraments. They will one day replace the nagging grandparents and will likely not be the impetus for the next generation. We need to make the change now to get in front of the continued decline affecting much of the Church in the West. I recommend starting with the families that are beginning the process rather than switching midway through on a family who signed up under a certain model. By starting with the new families you will slowly change the culture and within a few years it will be considered the norm.

We have relied heavily on the 7, 7, 7 model. A child is baptized as an infant, seven years later they receive their first Communion, seven years after that they receive Confirmation, and then seven years later they return to be married. On a whole, people are not getting married. If they do, it is much later and unlikely to be in the Church. Inadvertently, we have created processes that function like drive-thrus rather than on-ramps. Someone comes to us, orders what they want at the first window, completes the requirements, gets the “thing” at the second window and proceeds to drive away. When they come to us it is an opportunity to create on-ramps onto what I call the “faith freeway.” The faith freeway is what we want for all our people: full, active, conscious participation in a life of faith, regular participation in Sunday worship, intentional conversations and prayer at home, and exhibiting charity in deed.

We often try to drop people on the faith freeway which tends to overwhelm and risks them getting run over by the others on their way. The on-ramp needs to be progressive and deliberate to be able to draw them in and up to speed.

This invites us to reconsider the question of when someone should receive a certain sacrament. We usually focus more on age over readiness. Evaluating readiness can sound intimidating, especially in larger programs, but it is our responsibility. Canon 843 of the *Code of Canon Law* [henceforth: *CIC*] reminds us that although we cannot deny the sacraments,

Pastors of souls and other members of the Christian faithful, according to their respective ecclesiastical function, have the duty to take care that those who seek the sacraments are prepared to receive them by proper evangelization and catechetical instruction, attentive to the norms issued by competent authority.²⁴

Let us consider for a moment what the Church means by being prepared or ready to receive a sacrament. We cannot forget that it is the Holy Spirit who “prepares the faithful for the sacraments by the Word of God and the faith which welcomes that word in well-disposed hearts.”²⁵ This is best illustrated in the Parable of the Sower. The seed is the Word sown freely and generously, yet its fruitfulness is dependent upon the quality of soil that receives it. “But the seed sown on rich soil is the one who hears the word and understands it, who indeed bears fruit and yields a hundred or sixty or thirtyfold.”²⁶ Our responsibility is to help others till the soil of their hearts to become well-disposed to receive the grace given in a sacrament and be capable of growing into the fullness of its fruitfulness.

Proper disposition then must go beyond one's ability to recall information. There seem to be both internal and external

24 *The Code of Canon Law*, accessed November 5, 2022, Vatican.va, 843.2.

25 CCC 1133.

26 Matthew 13:23.

indicators of disposition. Pope Benedict XVI in *Sacramentum Caritatis* outlines the personal conditions required for fruitful participation in the liturgy:

One of these is certainly the spirit of constant conversion which must mark the lives of all the faithful. Active participation in the eucharistic liturgy can hardly be expected if one approaches it superficially, without an examination of his or her life. This inner disposition can be fostered, for example, by recollection and silence for at least a few moments before the beginning of the liturgy, by fasting and, when necessary, by sacramental confession. A heart reconciled to God makes genuine participation possible. The faithful need to be reminded that there can be no *actuosa participatio* in the sacred mysteries without an accompanying effort to participate actively in the life of the Church as a whole, including a missionary commitment to bring Christ's love into the life of society.²⁷

He continues further:

The Church's great liturgical tradition teaches us that fruitful participation in the liturgy requires that one be personally conformed to the mystery being celebrated, offering one's life to God in unity with the sacrifice of Christ for the salvation of the whole world. For this reason, the Synod of Bishops asked that the faithful be helped to make their interior dispositions correspond to their gestures and words. Otherwise, however carefully planned and executed our liturgies may be, they would risk falling into a certain ritualism. Hence the need to provide an education in eucharistic faith capable of enabling the faithful to live personally what they celebrate.²⁸

²⁷ Benedict XVI, *Sacramentum Caritatis*, accessed November 20, 2022, Vatican.va, 55.

²⁸ Ibid. 64.

In a sense, our lives are also sacramental, our words and actions reveal the working of invisible grace in us. The internal and external indicators of disposition should be congruent so we can truly live what we celebrate.

What does this look like practically? Before we confer Baptism on an adult we look for faith to be at work in their lives through conversion. To licitly baptize an infant we must have a founded hope that they will be brought up in the Catholic religion.²⁹ If the parents are not actively living their faith, it would be hard to establish a founded hope that the child would be brought up in the practice of the faith. In Reconciliation, we look for contrition. In the Eucharist, we should see a desire for the person to live in communion before conferring Communion. In Confirmation, we should see apostolic responsibility directing their daily lives. If we don't see these indicators of being well-disposed in ordinary circumstances, we should delay the reception of the sacrament and further accompany the family in a formation that helps open their hearts to the working of the Holy Spirit.

When should faith formation be done? This is kind of a trick question. Faith formation is not something that can happen only one hour a week, but needs to become an organic experience integrated into daily life. It should become the lens through which families see all the other aspects of their lives. We also need to help families reclaim the Sabbath as a day of rest, worship, and family time. The premier gathering time for the Church is on Sunday. When we gather families during the week they may be tempted to think that they go to church on Tuesday so they do not need to go on Sunday. Gathering families on Sunday for formation sessions can be a helpful way of directing them back to making Sunday a day for the Lord.

²⁹ CIC 868.1.2.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- From your experience, will the next generation continue to bring their children to faith formation? When will it be an ideal time to try a new model?
- Do your processes push people through a sacramental machine or are they governed by a readiness outcome?
- Should a family need to manifest communion before receiving Communion? Do you have a reasonable expectation that every parent presenting a child for Baptism will raise them in the practice of the faith?
- Is your current meeting schedule effective in leading families to Sunday worship?

[illegible]

WHERE

We now must consider “where” formation takes place. There can be a certain comfort we feel when people come to the church property for “class.” If they are in person, with a certified teacher delivering a message, then at least we can hope they were given the correct information. This may have been the case when the Church’s situational authority was respected, but in a culture that rejects the teaching authority of the Church when we say things like “the Church says” it is met with little openness. We must be careful not to fall into a gnostic attitude, one in which we assume to be the experts in faith and others must come to the enlightened to learn the secrets of the faith. It is easy to reject this in concept, but in practice this is what our structures have produced. Parents are led to believe that they are not equipped to teach and that they need to delegate that responsibility to a “professional” church person.

In a classroom model, the locus of formation is external to the learner and occurs over punctuated moments. They have to go somewhere, usually foreign to their daily lives, for around one hour a week, a little over half of the year. When compared to all of the other factors forming our children during their waking hours, it becomes evident that the locus of formation may need to shift to better produce fruit that remains. We are invited to transition the locus from being church centric - family supported, to family centric - church supported. Formation needs to move from something outside of themselves, that they can leave at church, to a reality that permeates every aspect of their lives. The world is being very intentional in the formation of our children, to combat this we must become even more intentional than the world. The *DC* clearly instructs us to consider other venues for formation:

In the current social and cultural context, it is appropriate to reflect on the specificity of the places of catechesis as instruments of proclamation and of education in human relationships. [...] The very widespread environments that

are patterned after school buildings do not constitute the best places for the unfolding of catechetical activities.³⁰

Perhaps we can consider living rooms as the new “where” for the unfolding of catechetical activities. It is in the home where we first learn to forgive, take care of others, and experience what love looks like. The home is well suited for education in the virtues.³¹ Faith must become what shapes our life for it to remain vital. We can say aptly that the family is the original small group. We are born into it and it is one of the only groupings that sees us through most of our lives. Instead of creating alternative family groups, we would be well served in investing our time and energy in strengthening the original one. With parents as the leaders of their Domestic Church, we need to spend our time forming and equipping them for this task. Teaching should happen in the home, related to daily life, and be supported at church by the gathering of the community to share faith and pray in common. The Church then can properly be understood as a family of families, where parents form parents, and children form children flowing from the wellspring of their lives at home.

Within the home, the best place to invest is in intentional conversations about faith between parents and children. Christian Smith's research points to the reality that how parents interact with their children about faith has more influence on the outcomes than the particular substance parents communicate:

The most effective parent conversations about religion with children are children - centered rather than parent - centered. In them, children ask questions and talk more while parents mostly listen; the questions about religion are clearly related to children's lives; parents try to help children understand their religious faith and practices; the conversations are open, not rigid or highly controlled; and the larger relationship between parents and children is thereby nurtured. When parents, by contrast, talk

30 DC 222.

31 CCC 2223.

too much, make demands without explanations, force unwanted conversations, and restrict discussions to topics that they control, faith transmission to children is likely to be ineffective or counterproductive.³²

It is also important to remember that the parish should not be understood primarily as a location where people gather, but as a territory which includes all of the Christian faithful within its bounds.³³ By building a supportive community of families, Church can be experienced on the baseball field, in the grocery store, at the beach, and in schools. Living out our faith at home and in the world is becoming increasingly more difficult. We need a community to help us remain intentional, so we can keep swimming upstream.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Where does faith formation happen in your parish? Where could it happen?
- Is your formation family centric or church centric?
- What are some of your hesitations in moving formation from the classroom to living rooms?
- Do you go to families or do you wait for them to come to you?

³² Adamczyk and Smith. *Handing Down the Faith*, 5.

³³ CIC 518.

[illegible]

WHY

What is your “why?” Our answer to this drives the whole of our lives. If we have forgotten our “why,” the rest will soon not matter. As leaders, our “why” has to be crystal clear if we are serious about leading families in a new direction. Are we solely sacramentalizing children or is our “why” a true desire to evangelize and draw people into a lifelong relationship with the Lord? This passage from the Gospel of John rings in my heart: “It was not you who chose me, but I who chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit that will remain, so that whatever you ask the Father in my name he may give you.”³⁴ God chose us to bear fruit that will remain. We can get so caught up in the day to day and easily forget the eternal horizon of why we do what we do.

This is equally a problem for the parents we serve. If asked why they bring their children to church for faith formation we may receive varied responses. When asked by researchers, American parents want religious education to instill a sense of moral right and wrong so their children can become good people.³⁵ They want their children to be good and successful, all while having a positive experience of church. How does our “why” align with the “why” of parents? At first glance, we may try to write off the “why” of the parents in favor of our more formed “why,” but this would be a mistake. We somehow have to find a way to meet them where they are and draw them into the deeper “why” that will remain forever. To be good is a starting point for holiness and we can guide the desire for success into doing the will of the Father as disciples. When we prioritize alignment over agreement we can, through a gradual process, bring parents to desire a lived relationship with God for their children now and forever, as much as we do. This alignment is crucial as the witness of parents becomes the defining aspect of producing fruit that remains. Their witness becomes their “why.” If they say one thing and proceed to do another it

³⁴ John 15:16.

³⁵ Adamczyk and Smith. *Handing Down the Faith*, 209.

creates suspicion in the hearts of their children and casts doubt on the importance of faith. Pope Saint Paul VI famously said: “Modern man listens more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if he does listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses.” The primary teachers of the faith must also live as witness to what they teach. “A Christian education more witnessed to than taught, more occasional than systematic, more ongoing and daily than structured into periods.”³⁶

Why should we try to change the structure of faith formation? Simply put, because the Church has asked us to. A helpful distinction to consider is the difference between stewardship and ownership. When we own something we can do whatever we want with it, because it belongs to us. Leaders can easily fall into this trap thinking it is their church, their ministry, or their program. In reality, none of it belongs to us, it all belongs to Christ and we are unprofitable stewards. To think we know better than the wisdom of the Church, guided by the power of the Holy Spirit, is how we will remain in decline. The Holy Spirit has revived the Church in every era and we must trust that if we follow the directives of the Church, he will remain faithful and continue to produce fruit that remains.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- What is your “why” in ministry?
 - How would you describe why the parents you serve bring their children to church for faith formation?
 - Do you know and follow the directives of the Church, trusting that the Holy Spirit will be faithful to his promises if you do?
 - What are your hopeful outcomes for families and how do you measure them?
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³⁶ DC 227.

[illegible]

HOW

We come to our final section, which is likely where we wanted to jump to from the beginning. To understand the “how” we needed to spend time reflecting on the who, what, when, where, and why. There is a change that needs to happen in the “how” that is not just programmatic, it needs to be systemic. Part of the “how” is having to decide what you stop doing, keep doing, and start doing. We will borrow a concept from the business management world known as “The Three Ps.” To create an organization that is sustainable and effective, the people, process, and programs all need to work together. A good way to think of this is to imagine it as a three-legged table. If one of the legs is a bit longer or shorter, the whole table will lose its balance. Similarly, if the process changes, the people and programs need to be adjusted as well to move in the new direction. We may be looking for the silver bullet program (which does not exist) to address the challenges we are seeing. However, programs are only as effective as the people who accompany them and the processes they follow. We will look at each of these areas as we consider the “how.”



Let us first reflect on the importance of people. The most effective ministry model has always been getting people into relationship with other people who have a relationship with Jesus; soon they will come to know him as well. The *DC* puts it well:

At the heart of the parish's presentation of evangelization is not a pastoral strategy, much less an elite and exclusive group of the perfect and of experts, but a community of missionary disciples, people with a living experience of the risen Christ who live out new relationships generated by him. A Christian community that, even in the weakness of its members and in the paucity of its resources, lives out this mystical fraternity, itself becomes the first and natural proclamation of the faith.³⁷

People are an essential ingredient in faith formation. The truths of our faith have to take flesh in real people not so different from the people they are serving. When a parent can sit across the table from another parent who shares similar life experiences and not feel alone, this becomes the foundation for authentic community. Community is then built by accompanying them through a process together. Ideally, we need someone who is beside us and someone who has gone before us. We cannot and should not attempt to lead this process alone. We need a team of individuals from different backgrounds, with varied gifts and strengths, positioned in the right places to best serve each family who comes to us. If you have a large community, you need to create structures that help make it feel smaller and more intimate. This can be accomplished by small groups. Directors form the small group leaders who in turn form the parents who then form their children.

Next we will consider the process. We are called to follow the process and pedagogy of Jesus modeled for us in the story of the road to Emmaus.³⁸ It is a familiar story, but revisiting it with the lens of formation can be transformative. The two disciples in the story were walking away from Jerusalem, feeling let down

³⁷ *DC* 303.

³⁸ Luke 24:13-35.

and disappointed by what they thought the Messiah would do. Many families we meet are also in the process of walking away from the Church, feeling disappointed and let down. Jesus did not just remain in Jerusalem to wait for them to return. He doesn't let his disciples just walk away, he meets them along the road, walks with them, and shares in their concerns; he accompanies them. We too are called to step out of our offices and comfort zones to come alongside the families we serve, accompanying them back into the fullness of grace God desires for them. Jesus could have immediately berated them with questions or unnecessary rebukes, but rather he began with simple questions that got them sharing what was going on in their hearts. Jesus knew exactly what they were thinking, but first received them in their concrete situation. We too are called to journey with families by first stopping to listen to their concerns and challenges, hopes and joys. Unlike Jesus, we cannot know someone's heart unless it is revealed to us. Our assumptions about who we are serving can easily be confirmed or amended based on an honest conversation. When we create a space and invite others to share by saying, "Tell me about that," we can unlock their hearts and begin to regain trust. Once we take the time to listen to someone, they become much more willing to listen and be led in return. This is the task of pre-evangelization. How we start a process will guide its trajectory. If it begins with a transaction, it will likely end with one, but if it begins with a relationship, it will likely persist in one.

The disciples had heard about Jesus, but had not yet personally experienced the risen Lord. This is the case for the majority of families we work with today. The next step in Jesus' process is crucial. "[H]e interpreted to them what referred to him in all the scriptures."³⁹ Jesus progressively revealed himself to them and provided a lens through which to understand their lives. This is the task of the kerygmatic proclamation and creedal catechesis. It is progressive, meaning a gradual and systematic formation in the faith that moves families into a deeper relationship with God. After the disciples encountered Jesus they desired for him to stay

³⁹ Luke 24:27.

with them. We want this for each of our families, to invite Jesus into their daily lives, to stay with them. Then flowing from this desire for community, real communion is possible. It is in this space that Jesus was able to celebrate the most important mystery of our faith. It is worth noting that Jesus did not begin his process with the breaking of the bread, but rather it was a pinnacle moment for the disciples. Immediate formation to receive a sacrament should also live in this space. Their eyes were opened, their hearts were burning, and their lives were changed. They were converted, they went from walking away to walking back toward Jerusalem. The goal of formation is conversion and communion. Jesus wants each person to encounter him and be changed. He wants to reorder our entire lives according to his will and orient us toward the eternal Jerusalem. Once we have our hearts set on heaven the rest of our lives become the focus of ongoing formation, to help make our lives an authentic witness to the Gospel.

This process is organic and continuous, rather than programmatic and punctuated. The process of Jesus is the catechumenal model and it should inspire how we approach catechesis at every age.⁴⁰

It therefore has an explicit missionary intention and is structured as an organic and cumulative whole for initiation into Christian faith and life. Precisely because of its missionary character, the catechumenate can also inspire the catechesis directed toward those who, although they have already received the gift of baptismal grace, do not actually taste its richness: in this sense, one speaks of catechesis inspired by the catechumenal model or a post-baptismal catechumenate or a catechesis of initiation into Christian life.⁴¹

Thomas Groome's "life to Faith to life" approach provides a wonderfully simple and effective way to frame many aspects of our praxis.

⁴⁰ DC 2.

⁴¹ DC 61.

A life to Faith to life approach to religious education and catechesis encourages a teaching/learning community of active participation, conversation, and presentation, in which people share their reflections upon their own lives in the world around a generative theme of life or of life in faith, are given persuasive and meaningful access to the truths and spiritual wisdom of Christian Story and Vision regarding the theme, are encouraged to integrate their lives and their Faith and to make decisions for lived, living, and life-giving faith as disciples of Jesus for God's reign in the world.⁴²

Experience is how we move knowledge from the head to the heart. This integration is essential if we want to produce fruit that remains.

Finally we will look at a program that lives out this restored process and helps mobilize your parish to journey with parents as they form their families. *Pathways*, by Faith and Family Life Catholic Ministries, is an integrated and family centered formation suite designed to facilitate a personal encounter with the Trinity and sustain a lifelong development of faith within the family. We are all at different points on the journey and a one size faith formation program does not fit all. This is a shift to a greater focus on parents as the primary educators of the faith. The suite is modular, each resource is designed to work together, but can also function independently. Create a path forward that is best for your families with our resources which include at-home and at-church experiences. *Pathways* puts parents at the center of teaching and sharing faith with their children. As the program leaders, your time and energy will be used to support and encourage parents to live out their vocation. Everything needed for families to have intentional conversations about Jesus, pray together, and interact with each other is included in our resources. As families journey through this process, you are invited to accompany and guide them with love and support from the Church community. With

42 Thomas H. Groome, *Will There Be Faith?: A New Vision for Educating and Growing Disciples* (New York, Harper One, 2011), 272-273.

progressive, immediate, and ongoing formation resources there is something for everyone.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Who do you know that you could invite onto a team to help you transition into a new process?
- In what ways does and doesn't your process align with the catechumenal model? How well do you accompany every family?
- Do the resources you currently use help facilitate intentional faith conversations in the home?
- Do you have a clear path forward for every family that comes to you?

CONCLUSION

This vision is the fruit of the many people and experiences that have formed me throughout my life. I am especially grateful to my high school youth minister and compliment in all of this, Pam Hurwitz. I would not be who I am today without her constant inspiration and accountability. It is an amazing gift to work with someone who can incarnate the best of what the Church desires for her people. I wrote this booklet to explain some of what is behind and within the *Pathways Formation Suite*. This is the framework that guides the development of our resources and formation of leaders. It is our hope that you were able to enter some of what has been our hearts and be moved as we are to renew our efforts in formation. Faith and Family Life Catholic Ministries mission is to rebuild the Church one family at a time. We seek to do this by creating and providing innovative and relevant resources to assist families in making the home the cornerstone for faith sharing and development, by supporting and training parents in their role as the primary educators of the faith, and by influencing the transformation of faith formation structures. We would love the opportunity to partner with you in this awesome task of forming the next generation.



Faith and Family Life
Catholic Ministries