

THE STANDARD OF TEACHING

Catechesis in the RCIA Catechumenate Period

But thanks be to God, that you who were once slaves of sin have become obedient from the heart to the standard of teaching to which you were committed.

~ Romans 6:17

The introductory article to this series (*To the Threshold and to the Fullness: What is the RCIA supposed to be?*) published in the October-December 2003 issue, included the following comment: “The catechetical endeavor native to the catechumenal process serves a deeply personal end – discovering at an intellectual level not simply how an individual learns the Faith, but how a participant falls in love. The goal of catechumenal catechesis is far more than imparting that which must be believed – it seeks to prepare participants for a new union, an embrace. This embrace is human and divine, unifying the two as water into wine, inviting participants to thereby quench the deepest call of relationship that Jesus gives – “I thirst” (John 19:28).

The privileged work of catechesis in the Christian initiation process forms the matter for discussion in this article. This article exists as a companion to that published in the previous issue of the *Sower* regarding the nature of the liturgical aspect of the catechumenate period, and will be followed by an article treating pastoral aspects in the same period of the RCIA process. The scope of this article is not so much as to present specific methodological “tips”; instead the purpose here is to examine how to present the Faith in an orderly and cohesive manner that fosters conversion and deep hunger to know the God who reveals such wonders. Addressed here are two interrelated issues: How to teaching the truths of the Faith *systematically*, and how to teach them *organically*. The first set of sections treats the systematic question – ways to determine the order of RCIA teachings by using pastoral, liturgical, and catechetical means. The second set of sections treats the organic question – ways to determine the relationships between doctrines by using the theological virtues,

salvation history, and the pillars of the Catechism.

Although the focus here is on the catechumenate period, this article also presents a more general discussion on the nature of catechesis in a Christian initiation setting and beyond. This is for two reasons:

- 1) It is a clear fact of catechetical life in the Western world that many professed followers of Christ do not hold to all of the core doctrines common to the Christian tradition. Within the Catholic Church, many refer to this as the problem, or perhaps the crisis, of dissent. Exploring in detail the sources of what Pope Paul VI called the “leaven of infidelity to the Holy Spirit” (PB 41) is beyond the scope of this article. However, the effort to not perpetuate the problem is very much relevant to this discussion of catechizing those entering the Catholic Church. In RCIA catechesis, attempts are often made to initiate adults into the Faith without due consideration of the cultural context of dissent, in which their adherence to the truth will be constantly challenged. If the Faith has not been taught in an authentically systematic and organic manner, participants may develop a fragmented, emaciated, and unenthusiastic view of doctrine, wherein the outright rejection of certain revealed truths or passive lack of formation of conscience becomes accepted as normal. The results of this kind of catechesis range from nominal adherence, lukewarmness, or cynicism, to outright absence from the visible fold soon after initiation. To counter this, the present article suggests the necessary, demanding, and wholly wonderful challenge of being what Pope John Paul II calls a “true catechist”, who can say, “I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you” (CT 6, 30; 1 Cor 11:23).

2) It is important to address a common issue that exists in both the United States and Great Britain, that is, the practice of using the Lectionary as the primary means to determine what to teach when throughout the entire RCIA process. This is popularly known as Lectionary-based catechesis, and is recommended by the magisterial RCIA guidelines for certain parts of the process, but not the whole. But, if the Lectionary is not the overall organizing principle of catechesis in the RCIA process, then in what way does a catechist determine the order of presenting the Faith? This article aims to respond in some detail to that question by suggesting practical structures for determining the organization of doctrine in a comprehensive, integral, and gradual (or incremental) form.

Let us recall that, for catechesis in the first period of the RCIA process, *the pre-catechumenate*, the focus is mainly apologetic and evangelistic, with a delivery of the basic Gospel message and unreserved answering of questions. The pre-catechumenate prepares for and is ordered to the first liturgical step, which is the Rite of Acceptance for the unbaptized or the Rite of Welcoming for the baptized. Putting the flesh on the skeletal structure presented in the previous period, the *catechumenate period* expounds the Deposit of Faith so that, by the second gateway, participants sufficiently understand the Faith and thus choose without hesitation to enroll their names among the elect or, if candidates, confidently continue their progress toward full communion with the Church. These rites provide the power and grace to nourish the elect (unbaptized) and the candidates (baptized) during the next period, *purification and enlightenment*, in which catechesis takes the form of a spiritual, reflective, and meditative preparation for the reception of the Sacraments of Initiation. *Mystagogy, or post-baptismal catechesis*, has traditionally been the time to deepen new Catholics' understanding of the Christian life, in light of now being able to receive the fullness of sacramental grace, and to present ways to synthesize all that they have learned, applying it to their lives.

Systematic Catechesis: Determining What to Teach When

Many catechists yearn for a specific order or pre-set curriculum of RCIA teachings, but the Church does not intend to mandate one. It is true that, "authentic catechesis is always an orderly and systematic initiation into the revelation that God has given of Himself in Christ Jesus" (CT 22; GDC 66). Balancing this, the *General Directory for Catechesis* states:

Indeed, "it can happen that in the present situation of catechesis, reasons of method or pedagogy may suggest the communication of the riches of the content

of catechesis should be organized in one way rather than in another." It is possible to begin with God so as to arrive at Christ, and vice versa. Equally, it is possible to start with man and come to God, and conversely. The selection of a particular order for presenting the message is conditioned by circumstances, and by the faith level of those to be catechized (GDC 118; material in quotations is from CT 31).

It cannot be emphasized too strongly that the method of determining the order of catechesis for a given set of participants must take into account liturgical, catechetical, and pastoral considerations at a given parish in a given year, as is laid out below.

The Pastoral Aspect of Considering What to Teach When: Who are the participants?

Each participant will vary in his or her background, lifestyle, motivation, and state in life. Catechists must organize their teaching around the needs displayed by each group of participants, and the ways they need to be shepherded. For this reason, it is a mistake to assume that an inflexible catechetical curriculum can be used, nor can the catechist plan to teach each session identically from year to year. The catechist's work is not just the delivery of doctrinal information; the catechist, rather, teaches a *Person* – the Person of Jesus. The all-important work of fostering conversion to Christ – which is the point of the catechumenal process – demands a catechetical flexibility that recognizes and communicates not only Jesus' unchanging universality, but also His intimacy to each participant. Further treatment of this aspect will be given in the next article.

The Liturgical Aspect of Considering What to Teach When: How do the rites affect the order?

The liturgy is the prime way the catechist should think about teaching the Faith. Inserting participants into the liturgy is equivalent to inserting them into eternity. Liturgy is central in considering what to teach when; that is, catechesis must be taught *to* and *from* the major and minor rites of the RCIA process. *Teaching to the rites* means looking at the questions to which participants will be required to respond at each rite, and ensuring that the teaching gives participants what they need to be able to respond with understanding and conviction. *Teaching from the rites* means looking at the proclamations and intercessions that are part of each rite to identify what the Church desires for participants and allowing that to shape the catechesis in the next stage of their journey.

Catechesis should be accommodated to the liturgical year, not only in the above manner, but also by teaching

a given lesson with clear reference to the liturgical season. This is done particularly through imparting a liturgically-appropriate tone (for example, a sense of penance, celebration, expectation, or thanksgiving; marking certain saints' days with examples from their lives, etc.) through discussing the practical application of the teaching to participants' lives. This does not, however, imply a Lectionary-based model of catechesis for the *entire* process. Lectionary-based catechesis does not meet the test of offering a systematic and organic catechesis in all periods of the catechumenal process. The Lectionary was not intended, and should not be made to serve, as a curriculum guideline – it does not follow the hierarchy of truths from Sunday to Sunday, and is not designed to accord with a systematic catechesis of the type envisioned in the RCIA manual (discussion of the hierarchy of truths follows in the next section).

In the mind of the Church, the Christian initiation process is intended to be fundamentally liturgical. Liturgical catechesis is an indispensable aid to conversion and fosters an intimate union with Christ and His Church. RCIA catechesis must be wholly ordered to the conversion of the hearts and minds of participants. Lectionary-based catechesis, while valuable in some circumstances, is not suitable as the *primary* principle upon which to base the order of teaching in the RCIA process. RCIA 75.1 calls for a catechesis that is “accommodated to the liturgical year, solidly supported by celebrations of the word.” This certainly calls for liturgical catechesis, but cannot be made synonymous with Lectionary-based catechesis, which does not allow for the “thoroughly comprehensive catechesis” (RCIA Appendix III, National Statutes for the United States 7) or the “orderly and systematic initiation” (GDC 66) envisioned by the Church.

In the RCIA setting, the Lectionary certainly has catechetical aspects in its own right, but is not specifically designed to provide a systematic, gradual unfolding of the Faith in the manner needed to create an organic understanding of and assent to the unity among the truths of the Faith. It is not a systematic

curriculum for the *entire* process. However, Lectionary-based catechesis, using the Year A readings, is specifically called for as a foundation for systematic catechesis during the period of Mystagogy. In this case, for example, the Lectionary readings for that year have specifically been chosen to provide a focused exploration of the sacramental life during post-baptismal catechesis (see RCIA 247; this is also the case for the readings relating to the Penitential Rite and the Year A readings relating to the three Scrutinies during Lent, where a clear theme of self-searching and repentance exists specifically with the catechumenal process in mind, see RCIA 146, 462).

The Lectionary also plays a central role in what many parishes call “Breaking Open the Word.” Breaking Open the Word is a separate element of the RCIA process from the catechetical session (see RCIA 81-84). It has an important role that is primarily liturgical, flowing from the proclamation at the Sunday Mass, and ordinarily continuing only for the duration of the Mass following the dismissal at the end of the Liturgy of the Word. This is, of course,

Lectionary-based, but without a direct systematic intent – which is by design here, as it should be – and is separate from the kind of catechetical formation referred to above. In summary, the Sunday Lectionary readings present doctrinal topics out of order from the hierarchy of truths, creating in much Lectionary-based catechesis a sense of “jumping around” that seriously impairs any kind of systematic unfolding of the Deposit

“In summary, initiatory catechesis, being comprehensive and systematic, cannot be reduced to the circumstantial or the occasional. As it is formation for the Christian life it comprises but surpasses mere instruction. Being essential, it looks to what is “common” for the Christian, without entering into disputed questions nor transforming itself into a form of theological investigation. Finally, being initiatory, it incorporates into the community, which lives, celebrates and bears witness to the Faith. It fulfills, at once, initiatory, educational and instructional functions. This inherent richness in the catechumenate of non-baptized adults should serve to inspire other forms of catechesis.” (GDC 68)

of Faith. This misuse of the Lectionary relative to the catechumenate makes creating tight cohesion among doctrines (the organic unity) quite stilted or forced, if it is even attempted at all within such a context. Very frequently, the price is that RCIA participants do not end up getting a firm grasp on the Faith, leaving them vulnerable to a secular culture quick to demand compromise on Catholicism's "hard sayings", and hobbled by a profound inability to think with the mind of the Church, the mind of Christ.

The Catechetical Aspect of Considering What to Teach When: What does this truth depend upon?

Each participant will vary in his or her walk with God. Some will never before have sought or experienced God, while others will already be strong Christians. Catechists must organize their teaching to ensure that the catechesis is both organic and complete, based on the composition of each specific group of participants in any given year.

Catechesis cannot be considered systematic and organic solely because it covers a great deal of material or is lengthy. *A defining characteristic of a systematic and organic catechesis is its presentation according to the hierarchy of truths* (see CCC 90, 234; GDC 114-115). Participants need to understand certain truths first in order to be able to understand others, and as catechesis proceeds, each truth needs to be linked to those taught previously. In the message of salvation, doctrines may "vary in their relationship to the foundation of the Faith" (UR 11). This is called the hierarchy of truths and it simply means "some truths are based on others as of a higher

priority, and are illumined by them" (GCD 43; cf. GDC 114-115). For example, Mary's Immaculate Conception would not make sense if a person did not first have some understanding of the Incarnation. This does not mean that some truths are less important than others, but it does mean that there is a way in which the truths of our Faith order themselves systematically around certain foundational truths. Connections between doctrines must be clear and deliberate at all stages, ensuring that catechesis has an obvious organic and systematic development, and is not merely episodic or random (which is sometimes what an uncritical acceptance of Lectionary-based catechesis can encourage) (cf. ACCC 58, 59).

Ordering RCIA teachings is a process that is generated, in part, by the relationship of each doctrine to the foundational truths upon which it is based. To construct a building, no one would start with the third or fifth floor; instead a carefully laid foundation must come first if it is to stand strong. Likewise, in order for RCIA participants to get a solid hold on the Deposit of Faith, it is critical to show them how all of the truths are grounded in several foundational truths. "Through an utterly free decision, God has revealed Himself and given Himself to man. This He does by revealing the mystery, His plan of loving goodness, formed for all eternity in Christ, for the benefit of all men. God has fully revealed this plan by sending us His beloved Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit" (CCC 50). Contained in this sentence are the foundational truths of revelation, which are invoked throughout the Catechism and provide a framework in which all doctrine finds its proper context. These are: the Trinity; the Person of Jesus, human and divine; the Paschal Mystery; the dignity of the human person; and the Church as the Body of Christ.

The first foundational truth is the Trinity. We come from the Trinity. Hopefully, we will spend eternity living in the Trinity. Therefore, it makes sense that all truth should be understood in terms of the Trinity (GDC 99). "The whole history of salvation is identical with the history of the way and means by which the one true God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, reveals Himself to men and reconciles and unites with Himself those who turn away from sin" (GCD 47; CCC 236).

The second foundational truth is the Person of Jesus, the Second Person of the Trinity, the God-man, human and divine. "At the heart of catechesis we find, in essence, a Person, the Person of Jesus of Nazareth" (CT 5). Everything is summed up in Jesus; everything comes through Him and emanates from Him. Everything must be taught in reference to Him. For example, the Ten Commandments "prepare and dispose the chosen people and each Christian for conversion

Initiation Catechesis: A Process of Conversion, Not a Program of Classes

- ✦ A process – not a program of pre-set duration for all participants (GDC 143)
- ✦ A turning process – focused on conversion from sin to sanctity (GDC 82)
- ✦ A gradual process – building systematically piece upon piece (GDC 88-89)
- ✦ A personal process – mindful that conversion is highly individual (GDC 118; CT 31)
- ✦ A pervasive process – leaving no part of participants' lives untouched (GDC 116; CT 22)
- ✦ A community process – joining not just to God, but to His visible family (GDC 72, 158; CT 24)
- ✦ A supernatural process – "Then He opened their minds to understand the scriptures" (Luke 24:45)

and faith in the Savior God” (CCC 1963); it is Jesus who reveals the new commandment to love one another as He has loved us, it is in Jesus that “the Law of the Gospel fulfills, refines, surpasses, and leads the Old Law to its perfection” (John 15:12; CCC 1967, Matt 5:17-19).

The third foundational truth is the Paschal Mystery, the redemptive work accomplished by Christ’s Passion, Death, Resurrection, and Ascension. “The Paschal Mystery is a real event that occurred in history, but it is unique...all that Christ is – all that He did and suffered for all men – participates in the divine eternity, and so transcends all times while being made present to them all” (CCC 1085). The catechist must demonstrate that the Paschal Mystery informs every teaching. For example, when teaching on grace, it is essential to show that, “all this is from God, who through Christ has reconciled us to Himself” (2 Cor 5:17-18; CCC 1999); when teaching on suffering, “Faith in God the Father Almighty can be put to the test by the experience of evil and suffering. God can sometimes seem incapable of stopping evil. But in the most mysterious way, God the Father has revealed almighty power in the voluntary humiliation and Resurrection of His Son, by which He conquered evil” (CCC 272); or, when teaching on the Virgin Mary “who, in ‘her pilgrimage of faith’ walked into the ‘night of faith’ in sharing the darkness of her son’s own suffering and death” (CCC 165).

The fourth foundational truth is the dignity of the human person. The dignity of the human person springs from the incredible fact that, starting from the beginning, the white-hot, passionate love between the three Persons of the Trinity, needing nothing else, nevertheless desired to have more beings to participate in that divine love, to share it. We have this incredible dignity of being made in the image and likeness of God. Angels are like God, because everything that is good has to be like God. But it is not said of them that they were created in the image and likeness of God in the same manner as humans. Angels do not unite bodily with one another and create something; angels do not have families and make other angels. They do not participate in creation in the profound way that humans do. That the dignity of being human is founded in the divine image is almost totally lost on society. So many spend so much time trying to make everything anthropocentric that they forget how wonderful humans *in God*, not seeing that robbing humanity of God reduces humanity rather than raising it higher. In Christianity, the dignity of the human person is, ironically, one of the most lethal antidotes to pride.

The fifth foundational truth is the mystery of the Church, which is Christ’s Mystical Body. “It is in the Church that Christ fulfills and reveals His own mystery

as the purpose of God’s plan ‘to unite all things in Him’” (Eph 1:10; CCC 772). It is essential for RCIA participants to understand that the life of faith is a gift of the Holy Spirit, who is present in the Church, sanctifying it and guiding it until the glorious coming of Christ (GCD 43). Moreover, the Church is Christ’s instrument for the salvation of all by which Christ is “at once manifesting and actualizing the mystery of God’s love for men” (LG 2, 9, 48; CCC 776). The catechist realizes that the Church is not one topic to be covered, but rather it is a foundational truth that informs, contains, and communicates the riches of all aspects of the Catholic Faith.

The ordering of teachings within the catechumenate period requires a firm understanding of the foundational truths and the way in which all other truths flow from them. These foundational truths, then, should be laid out at the beginning and referred back to during subsequent sessions. In this way, the catechist can provide the candidates and catechumens with an overarching framework in which the entire Deposit of Faith can and must be understood.

Basing the structure and selection of teachings on the hierarchy of truths cannot be done within the limit of the Lectionary readings. In fact, the Lectionary itself can only be understood properly in terms of these foundational truths. If a catechist organized the order of teachings according to the Lectionary readings, it could leave the candidates and catechumens struggling to grasp the coherence of the Faith. Depending on when they enter the catechumenate, using the Lectionary as a basis of a curriculum could potentially leave participants struggling to make sense of the Ten Commandments without first understanding ourselves as being created in God’s image; or it could leave participants attempting to make sense of Mary’s Assumption without first having understood the mystery of the Incarnation.

In summary, the issue of *what to teach when* can be worked out for each catechumenate by organizing the teachings in a way that honors the pastoral process, that teaches toward the liturgy, and that builds systematically according to the hierarchy of truths. The following sections address means of making catechumenal teachings not only systematic, but also organic.

Organic Catechesis: Teaching the Unity of Faith by Means of the Theological Virtues

The most important knowledge of life is that which answers *first order questions*. Some of these questions are: “What should we seek above all? What should we seek to avoid? What should be believed, first and last?” Arising from a person in the RCIA process, these particular questions would be wonderful! Long ago, these exact questions and others were on the mind of a person named

Laurence, and he asked them of the good Bishop of Hippo, St. Augustine. Augustine first summarized his questions into a central query: “Perhaps this is exactly what you wish me to explain briefly and to sum up in few words: how God is to be worshipped” (Augustine, *Enchiridion on Faith, Hope, and Love*, I, 2). Augustine’s monumental answer is profoundly simple: “God is to be worshipped with faith, hope, and love” (I, 3). He goes on, “Without a doubt you will know all these things for which you are looking if you take care to know what should be believed, hoped for, and loved. These are the most important things, or rather the only things, that are to be followed in religion” (I, 4). His answer presents a masterful way – a practical teaching model – to present the Faith in an RCIA setting.

Augustine’s assertion – that all doctrine can and should be related to through the three theological virtues – is significant because in this way all tenets of the Faith can be easily interrelated and increasingly applied in the ordinary adult Christian life. It addresses the “So?” as well as the “So what?” of the modern world in an easily understood manner. Put another way, it makes the crucial link between comprehensive, integral formation and the daily experience of the average adult seeking to know God: “Systematic instruction is justified to the degree to which it helps the student to perceive Christian doctrine as a compact organic unity and to understand more fully its central mystery and *its value in his life*” (Johannes Hofinger, S.J. and Francis Buckley, S.J., *The Good News and Its Proclamation*, emphasis added, 68). Developing this methodology of attaching all

doctrines to one or more of the theological virtues allows an RCIA catechist to focus on expressing truths of the Faith in practical and convincing ways. Knowledge and facts should not have to be “stored up”, but should be immediately applicable to participants’ lives and personal struggles: “Does God exist?” “I need to have something real to hope for.” “I know I should love better.” “So, how can this doctrine you are teaching right now help me do these things?”

By using faith, hope, and love as a principle of making instruction organic, the catechist deliberately prepares a teaching with the intention of showing RCIA participants how this or that doctrine or truth helps them to more fully believe in God, trust God’s promises, or love Him and others more fully. This is concrete and realistic, conveying that *no truth has been revealed to be an end in itself*, but instead to aid the adult in the life of believing, hoping, and loving. In keeping with St. Augustine, all catechesis on doctrine points to this method; its inescapable applicability to the daily struggles of life arouses a hunger for doctrines because they then become for participants “lights along the path of faith; they illuminate it and make it secure” (CCC 89).

It is in keeping with the pedagogy of Christ that we deliver a “pressing invitation to a manner of living sustained by faith in God, by hope in the kingdom and by charity to one’s neighbor” (GDC 140). To the questions, “Who am I and why am I here?” God answers with a superabundant light in order that we may know who God is and what His plan is for us (CCC 26). He gives us faith. To the question, “What is going to happen to me when I die?” God answers by giving us confident expectation in His Word, and a foretaste of Heaven (CCC 1818-1820, 1090). He gives us the gift of hope. And, to the question, “How am I to live?” God gives us charity so that we can love God above all things for His own sake, and our neighbor as ourselves (John 13:34; CCC 1822).

All that we teach and model should deepen participants’ understanding of, or prepare them for a life of faith, hope and love. For example, when we teach about Mary’s Assumption into Heaven, the teaching should be permeated and informed by the theological virtues. If this does not happen, then the teaching on Mary’s Assumption can seem useless to participants. We can start with the fact that the Assumption of Mary is an article of faith: it is a truth in which we believe. We are led to see the role of Mary’s faith in God’s perfect plan, and how this impacted her at the end of her earthly existence. Through the eyes of faith, we are led to hope: is it not the case that God also has a role for us in His perfect plan? Do we not look to our resurrection in the hope of living in Heaven, soul *and* body, as Mary does? This hope leads us to a deeper understanding

Elements of Initiation Catechesis:

- ✦ To know (GDC 174) – “...sincere and patient dialogue...” (AG 11)
- ✦ To be known (EN 41, 46; GDC 158-159) – “...establish relationships of respect and love...” (AG 11)
- ✦ Centered on the One to be known (GDC 89)
- ✦ Preparatory only – implying life-long pursuit of Christ at the feet of Mother Church (GDC 90)
- ✦ An invitation to participation – mindful of the reciprocal nature of inculturation; the Church needs them (GDC 90)
- ✦ Discernment – teaching them to read what God has written in themselves (GDC 152c)
- ✦ Definitive goal – peace, joy, the satisfaction of our deepest desires, and the beginning of Heaven (GDC 117; CT 21)
 - ~ Systematic and organic
 - ~ Focused on essentials
 - ~ Open to the fullness of the Christian life

of how we are to live. If we get our bodies back, what does this say about the importance and dignity of the body, even the theology of the body? Mary's Assumption should lead us to a deeper awareness of how we treat ourselves and one another as temples of the Holy Spirit. In other words, it should lead us to charity. There is an inherent relationship between doctrine and life, between knowledge and love, between the intellect and the will, between orthodoxy and orthopraxy (see GDC 85). In the context of faith, hope, and love these relationships move participants ever more deeply into Christ's life. What does life in Christ look like in the here and now? What is it, specifically? It is a life lived in faith, hope and love. "We give thanks to God always for you all, constantly mentioning you in our prayers, remembering before our God and Father your work of *faith* and labor of *love* and steadfastness of *hope* in our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Thess 1:2-3, emphasis added).

Organic Catechesis: Teaching the Unity of Faith by Means of the Catholic Family Story

When a person receives the Sacraments of Initiation, God's plan is being accomplished: He created each of us in order to live together as a family in Him. The role of the catechist is to share with others the story of who God is and what His plan is for us. "We heard with our own ears, O God, our fathers have told us the story of the things you did in their days, you yourself, in days long ago" (Psalm 44:1). Every teaching given to RCIA participants should flow from and be directed toward their participation in the Catholic "family story" as another means to achieve a genuinely organic catechesis. For this story includes, with the telling of it, an invitation to join the family and make the story one's own.

This story informs the structure of what we hand on; it is a unifying force that gives the candidates and catechumens a framework in which to place each new teaching. For this reason, the story should be told, in its entirety, near the very beginning of the catechumenal process. This can be accomplished in thirty minutes. The catechist simply lays out the story, element by element, beginning with God, continuing to the present day, and following through all the way to the last things: death, judgment, Heaven and Hell. The major points of the story could be summarized as follows:

- 1) God our uncreated Creator, who is utterly transcendent; God is a Trinity, a family of Persons who has a plan of intimacy for us;
- 2) Creation: especially being created in the image of God, as well as the creation of angels;
- 3) The Fall: sin, death, and separation of the human family from God;
- 4) God's gathering of a people to Himself: the covenants with Noah, Abraham, Moses, and David;

- 5) The Incarnation (proper emphasis here): true Man and true God; Mary's unique participation in God's gift of Himself, her "yes" to God;
- 6) The Paschal Mystery: Jesus' Passion, Death, Resurrection and Ascension – our redemption;
- 7) The establishment of the Universal Church: God the Father re-gathers us as His own;
- 8) The descent of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost: the guarantor of the Deposit of Faith and the life of the Deposit of Grace;
- 9) The story since Pentecost: a new family identity, the saints, all of us here and now;
- 10) The Second Coming of Jesus and the reality of the promises of Heaven.

By telling the story at the outset of the catechumenal process, the catechist can then place each new teaching in the context of the Catholic family story. Each truth is like an episode in the continuing story of God's love for us. At some point in the catechumenate period, the catechist can and should go back and tell the story again, in greater detail and length, incorporating more personal reflection. This could take over an hour of time, but it is well worth it. The story of God's love for us gives each catechetical session coherence by uniting it with everything else that has been unpacked for them.

Organic Catechesis: Teaching the Unity of Faith by Means of the Pillars of the Catechism

All of the keys mentioned above help to keep the Deposit of Faith from being perceived as a mere assortment of various lists (seven of these, three of those, ten of something else) and, more importantly, they summon each participant to unity in Christ.

The Faith is an organic unity, a living and complete union in God, and must be taught as such. As has been already discussed, this can be done by honoring the integral relationship between liturgy, catechesis, and pastoring; by presenting the Deposit of Faith systematically organized around the hierarchy of truths; by showing how these truths inform our relationship with God in the context of faith, hope, and love; and by presenting each truth within the story of salvation history, which is nothing less than the story of God's never-ending love for us. And there is one more way to teach the Faith as a living whole; there is one final key for delivering the Deposit as unity in Christ, and this is called the classic catechesis.

"They devoted themselves to the Apostles' teaching, to the breaking of the bread, to fellowship, and to prayer" (Acts 2:42). This passage, which encapsulates the four-fold life of the early Church, bears witness to the unity of our Catholic worldview: there is an interrelation among our faith, our liturgy, our moral lives, and our prayer. "This mystery, then, requires that the faithful believe in it,

that they celebrate it, and that they live from it in a vital and personal relationship with the living and true God. This relationship is prayer” (CCC 2558).

The catechism itself is structured around these “four fundamental dimensions of the Christian life”: the profession of faith (Part I), the celebration of the Christian liturgy (Part II), the morality of the Gospel (Part III), and prayer (Part IV) (GDC 122).

In this way, “the structure of the Catechism of the Catholic Church derives from the profound unity of the Christian life” (GDC 122). Whether it is proposed for belief, for worship, for moral living, or for prayer, it is essential that a catechist show each truth as being integrally related to each of these facets of Christian living.

So, for example, in teaching about the Sacrament of Reconciliation, the starting point is Part II of the Catechism, in paragraphs 1420-1498. From here, the teaching can expand to other parts of the Catechism and show where the Creed professes the forgiveness of sins through Christ (Part I), the moral ramifications that forgiveness has for our lives (Part III), and the importance of praying with the recognition of our need for forgiveness, to restore a relationship that has been wounded (Part IV).

Each of the four parts of the Catechism continually reminds the catechist that each truth is integrally connected with, or built upon, the hierarchy of truths. Take a moment to thumb through any section of the Catechism. Try reading any five or ten paragraphs without discovering links to the Trinity, the Incarnation, the Paschal Mystery, the Church, or the dignity of the human person. It is impossible! Each part of the Catechism continually draws from and relates back to the hierarchy of truths, giving witness to the organic unity of our Faith.

The Faith is a living unity, reflecting God’s oneness. By considering links to all four pillars of the Catechism, placing each teaching within the story of salvation history, making careful connections to the hierarchy of truths, and showing the real-life relationship of the teaching to living a life of faith, hope, and love, catechists will be enabling RCIA participants to grasp the Faith as a whole. Instead of being reduced to teaching lists and isolated

doctrinal tenets, the catechist should be equipped to give an “organic presentation of the Faith in its entirety” (CCC 18).

Conclusion: The Sacrificial Effort of Becoming a True Catechist in Christ

What has been laid out here is demanding; it presumes serious striving on the part of the catechist. The time, effort, study, and prayerful diligence that it takes to become this kind of catechist – to not settle for mediocrity or the status quo – is profoundly appropriate to the privileged work of serving God’s own (see Matt 18:5-6; James 3:1). “Having purified your souls by your obedience to the truth for a sincere love of the brethren, love one another earnestly from the heart” (1 Peter 1:22). When the Christians were waiting for their martyrdoms in the arena, many of their guards were converted by the love that they saw. It was extraordinary. Our call as catechists can be summarized this way:

It is . . . important for catechists that they grow interiorly in the peace and joy of Christ, so that they may be examples of hope and courage (see Rom 12:12). For Christ “is our peace” (Eph 2:14), and He gives His apostles His joy that their “joy may be full” (John 15:11). Catechists therefore should be bearers of paschal joy and hope, in the name of the Church. In fact, *“the most precious gift that the Church can offer the bewildered and restless world of our time is to form within it Christians who are confirmed in what is essential and who are humbly joyful in their faith.”* (GCM 8; italicized citation is from CT 61).

Finally, then, what is our job as catechists? It is no job at all. Showing the reality of God’s love is never a job; it is a privilege, our privilege, to teach the truths of the Church as the “lights along the path of faith” (CCC 89). Catechists have the sublime duty to establish people in the truth of the love and forgiveness of God. Catechists have the opportunity to lead those on the journey of faith to come to the breathtaking realization that God loves them and will continue to love them regardless of what they have done or think they have done. In this hope alone can our mere humanity be opened to the call to and the pursuit of divinization. Catechists, following the mission of Christ Himself, have the opportunity to teach that anyone, and everyone, can be a saint (see Matt 5:48).

Abbreviations for Magisterial Documents used in the article:

- AG* *Ad Gentes Divinitus*, Decree on Missionary Activity, Second Vatican Council, December 7, 1965.
- ACCC* *Adult Catechesis in the Christian Community*, International Council for Catechesis, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1990.
- CCC* *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1994, second edition, 1997.
- CT* *Catechesi Tradendae*, On Catechesis in Our Time, John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation, October 16, 1979.
- EN* *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, Evangelization in the Modern World, Paul VI, Encyclical Letter, December 8, 1975.
- GCD* *General Catechetical Directory*, Sacred Congregation for the Clergy, April 11, 1971.
- GCM* *Guide for Catechists*, Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples, December 3, 1993.
- GDC* *General Directory for Catechesis*, Sacred Congregation for the Clergy, August 11, 1997.
- PB* *Paterna cum Benevolentia*, On Reconciliation within the Church, Paul VI, Apostolic Exhortation, December 8, 1974.
- RCIA* *Ordo Initiationis Christianae Adultorum*, Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults, Editio Typica, Typis Polyglottis Vaticanis, 1972.
- UR* *Unitatis Redintegratio*, Decree on Ecumenism, Second Vatican Council, November 21, 1964.

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