



**The  
Catechetical  
Leader in  
the Third  
Millennium**

► A Statement of the Catholic Bishops of New York State

*“The Church in  
New York State...  
needs a renewed  
commitment to the  
call, recruitment,  
formation, and  
affirmation of women  
and men of faith as  
parish catechetical  
leaders.”*

Abbreviations used in this document

CT	On Catechesis in Our Times ( <i>Catechesi Tradendae</i> )
GDC	General Directory for Catechesis
NDC	National Directory for Catechesis
USCCB	United States Conference of Catholic Bishops

Approved: November 2011

## Introduction

### The Catechetical Leader in the Third Millennium

WE THE BISHOPS OF NEW YORK STATE have a history of collaboration with the New York State Council of Diocesan Directors of Religious Education. This collaboration was evident in the jointly written pastoral vision for catechists in New York State entitled *The Catechist in the Third Millennium*, which was published in 1998. That document affirmed the primacy of catechesis in the mission of the Church and called for a renewed commitment to the recruitment, formation and ministry of the catechist as a top priority in our parishes and Catholic schools. The document not only provided our state with a framework for forming catechists, it earned a national award for providing the province with a unified vision of catechist formation. In addition, we published a document in 1988, *Journeying Toward a Future Full of Promise*, which presented a vision for catechesis in New York State. Ongoing collaboration of the chief catechists of the dioceses and their diocesan catechetical leaders has resulted in the further integration of this vision, which is lived out in various ways in each particular diocese.

This new century presents opportunities and challenges. The Church has given us visionary catechetical documents to ensure that the essential truths of our Catholic faith and tradition would be known, shared and lived in an increasingly complex, changing world. The teaching found in the *General Directory for Catechesis*, *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* and the *National Directory for Catechesis* became the anchor and guide for a renewal of catechesis throughout the world. We began to understand in a deeper and more authentic manner the relationship between evangelization and catechesis and to implement new initiatives for evangelizing catechesis for all age groups. We have been reminded again that “catechesis is a pivotal dimension of the Church’s pastoral activity and a significant element in all the Church does to hand on the faith.”<sup>1</sup> As our understanding of the scope of catechesis has expanded over the past several years, and as the need for the formation of adults and families has become more apparent, parish catechetical programs have continued to grow in importance.

Today, parishes in New York State face certain realities, including diminished financial resources and increasing pastoral expectations; a declining Catholic School enrollment that often results in school closings; diminishing participation of children and young people in parish Catechetical programs; a waning participation in Sunday Eucharist; the changing role of the priest, especially in merged and combined parishes; expanding legal considerations; loss of respect and trust for the Church due to the sexual abuse scandal; fewer clergy and vowed religious; secularism; competing demands for time and resources; and the growing number of extern priests. Pastors and pastoral administrators are faced with challenges in every aspect of their ministry, including tensions about how to reconcile shrinking resources with expanding and sometimes competing needs. The catechetical enterprise is critical to the mission of the Church and to the health and vitality of a parish and its people. Pastors and pastoral administrators know that “parishes should allocate their resources so they are able to acquire the services of a competent and qualified catechetical leader ... or to share those services with another parish.”<sup>2</sup> Discovering how to achieve that end, while meeting all pastoral needs, is one of the most vexing issues parishes face.



The speed and the complexity of the changes in this new millennium are unprecedented. On the positive side, the Church, and our whole society, is prospering and has been enriched by the gifts of new peoples, languages and traditions. At the same time, relativism, individualism, indifference to human life, and a widespread disregard for traditional religious and family values pose profound challenges to the Church. But our God has called us to live in this world and in these times and to speak clearly and to live authentically as disciples of His Son, Jesus Christ.

Pope John Paul II reminded us that “... the definitive aim of catechesis is to put people not only in touch but in communion, in intimacy, with Jesus Christ: only He can lead us to the love of the Father in the Spirit and make us share in the life of the Holy Trinity.”<sup>3</sup> While there is no easy solution to the challenges noted here, we believe that evangelization and effective catechetical ministry are part of the answer to renew the local Church. In *Catechesis in Our Times*, John Paul II reminds priests of the important role they play in catechesis: “The Church expects you to neglect nothing with a view to a well-organized and well-oriented catechetical effort.”<sup>4</sup> Pastors are the Bishops’ “closest collaborators in ensuring that the goals of the diocesan catechetical mission are achieved.”<sup>5</sup> To assist them in this ministry, pastors frequently appoint a catechetical leader to collaborate with them in the effective implementation of a comprehensive catechetical plan.<sup>6</sup> All catechetical leaders, pastors and those appointed to assist them must be well-trained to serve in the role to which they have been called and to meet the complex challenges of an evolving catechetical ministry.

We believe that God is ever and always present and calling for heroic servant leadership for catechetical leaders. Therefore, we have entitled this profile *The Catechetical Leader in the Third Millennium* as a complement to our earlier document, *The Catechist in the Third Millennium*. The Church in New York State, having journeyed already one decade in this century, needs a renewed commitment to the call, recruitment, formation and affirmation of women and men of faith as parish catechetical leaders. The Bishops of the United States noted in the *National Directory of Catechesis*: “The single most critical factor in an effective parish catechetical program is the leadership of a professionally trained parish catechetical leader.”<sup>7</sup>

Today’s catechetical leader must be first and foremost a disciple of Christ and also needs particular competencies to face the challenges of the contemporary church. The USCCB’s *National Certification Standards for Lay Ecclesial Ministers* lists several criteria for these competencies, including formation in doctrine and tradition.<sup>8</sup> This profile, *The Catechetical Leader in the Third Millennium*, builds on those competencies and identifies five additional areas in which catechetical leaders require proficiency: Evangelization, the Changing Parish Landscape, the Family, Cultural Realities and Technology.



---

# Evangelization

---

POPE PAUL VI'S *Evangelization in the Modern World*, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops' Pastoral Letter on evangelization, *Go and Make Disciples* and the *National Directory for Catechesis* call the Church and the catechetical leader in particular to perceive all ministry through the lens of evangelization. The *General* and *National Directories* speak clearly about evangelization as the mission of the Church and about the purpose of catechesis within this mission to enable every believer to live as true disciples with a mature faith in Jesus Christ.<sup>9</sup> Evangelization in our nation and state occurs in diverse and changing social, religious and cultural contexts. Some people simply have never had an encounter with Christ. Some have been baptized but have never personally appropriated the gift of faith. Some have been catechized but have left the faith community out of indifference, societal factors, hurt, scandal, etc. All of us are encouraged to embrace the proclamation of the Gospel with renewed ardor and vigor. Pope John Paul II called us to a "new evangelization" that would address the challenges of our own time. Pope Benedict XVI continues to articulate this mission and calls us to participate in it. We are challenged to spare no effort to bring the Gospel to all and every aspect of our culture to reclaim the imaginations of our people. In this mission, each person is called to a deeper conversion and relationship with our Lord Jesus Christ.

How does the importance of evangelization impact today's catechetical leader?

### **The Competent, Contemporary Catechetical Leader:**

- ▶ personally accepts and lives the Gospel and the teachings of the Church;
- ▶ commits to ongoing spiritual formation;
- ▶ understands and is able to articulate the Catholic faith in the areas of Sacred Scripture, Christology, Sacraments, Morality, Church, Liturgy, Spirituality/Prayer, Christian Anthropology, Ecumenism and the Church's social teachings as expressed in *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* and other relevant Church documents;
- ▶ re-imagines the scope and methods of evangelizing catechesis.

### **This catechetical leader has the skills necessary to:**

- ▶ plan, organize, direct, and evaluate the ministry of catechesis through the lens of evangelization;
- ▶ develop models of catechesis for outreach to the unchurched, the inactive and the active of all ages and cultures;
- ▶ select programs, resources, and processes that enable each child, youth and adult to know and love Jesus Christ;
- ▶ collaborate with parish leadership to form the community for its role as evangelizers.

---

# The Changing Parish Landscape

---

WHILE PARISHES REMAIN the primary locus for the catechetical mission of the Church, the changing parish landscape presents numerous challenges to the work of the catechetical leader. Today's parishes are often reconfigured from previous parishes. Many parishes have linked or merged and now serve more than one geographic, cultural and ethnic community. There are also new and evolving models of pastoral leadership, such as clergy being responsible for multiple parishes and worship sites; a growing reliance on the non-ordained for parish leadership; and a number of international priests serving as pastoral leaders. No matter how a parish is configured, the pastor or pastoral administrator, in partnership with the catechetical leader, is responsible for providing effective catechesis.

What new skills does the changing parish landscape require from catechetical leaders?

**The Competent, Contemporary Catechetical Leader:**

- ▶ is aware that the “Christian community is the origin, locus and goal of catechesis” and that understanding the parish is critical to effective catechesis<sup>10</sup>;
- ▶ respects the heritage and tradition(s) of parishes that are experiencing change;
- ▶ is knowledgeable about catechetical models and best practices that have proven effective in meeting the needs of parishes today;
- ▶ leads parishioners to look beyond both former and current parochial boundaries and to collaborate in the development of faith formation programs which address the needs of recently reconfigured, linked and merged parishes.

**This catechetical leader has the skills necessary to:**

- ▶ build community, collaborate and develop strategies and models to address the changing catechetical needs in emerging parishes;
- ▶ develop processes to facilitate conversation, cooperation and collaboration with pastors, parish leadership groups and catechists who are responsible for the development and implementation of catechetical models for parishes;
- ▶ recruit and train volunteers to assist in the implementation of new models for catechesis.

---

THERE IS NO INSTITUTION more fundamental to the life of the person and society than the family, and no institution has undergone more significant changes in recent decades. The Church recognizes and respects the importance of family and the primary role parents have in forming their children in faith. At the same time, we recognize the many challenges today’s families face and the changing realities of today’s family life.<sup>11</sup> Among the most significant changes influencing the modern family in the United States is its increasing secularization. Statistics clearly indicate an ever-increasing percentage of families who choose, for various reasons, to have little or no meaningful participation in the life of the Church. We are aware of the heartache of those observant parents who raised faith-filled children and now find that their children and grandchildren do not practice. Likewise, many of these same families are raising children with no specific religious tradition, despite their nominal membership in the Catholic Church. This is an alarming fact that must be addressed honestly, directly and immediately. Evangelization and catechesis are not only pastoral priorities but foundational elements of the Church’s mission.

What does a catechetical leader need to know to support and affirm today’s families?

**The Competent, Contemporary Catechetical Leader:**

- ▶ recognizes and supports parents in their role as the first catechists for their children;
- ▶ is fully aware of the many and varied changes affecting the family and the manner in which the family manifests itself in the modern world (such as the decline in the number of traditional nuclear families; the increase in the number of single parent families; the high rate of interfaith marriages; and the significant rise in divorces and separations);
- ▶ recognizes and understands the impact of societal and cultural realities on families;
- ▶ understands and respects the particular strengths of families from various cultures.

---

## The Family

---

## Cultural Realities

### **This catechetical leader has the skills necessary to:**

- ▶ direct the implementation of catechetical programs that are both sensitive to the practical needs and the modern situation of families, and that are faithful to the Gospel and the teachings of the Church;
- ▶ provide catechetical models that support the family as the domestic church and the primary environment for faith formation.

---

THE INNUMERABLE CULTURAL REALITIES that define and condition the values, beliefs, traditions, and way of life of all of God's children are also found in the Church. These cultural realities present positive features that we embrace, and challenges that we strive to meet. As the *National Directory for Catechesis* reminds us, "The increasing diversity present in most local churches has provided rich opportunities. The multiple ethnic, racial and cultural communities make possible a spirit that renews and sustains the life of the local church."<sup>12</sup> These realities include not only the diversity of culture and ethnicity, but also particular challenges that are prevalent in American culture. These challenges include rampant individualism, which enables pragmatism and relativism; secularism, which is marked by materialism and consumerism; and an ideological polarization that is evidenced in individual and group beliefs, which diverge from or directly undermine and contradict Gospel values and the teachings of the Church.

How can a catechetical leader acknowledge and respond to the diversity of cultures present in today's Church?

### **The Competent, Contemporary Catechetical Leader:**

- ▶ recognizes and respects the diversity of people in the parish;
- ▶ gives a consistent public witness to transform the world;
- ▶ recognizes and responds to the growing reality of the Hispanic community in today's Church;
- ▶ is aware of the growth of particular populations in the parish and welcomes and incorporates all cultures, ethnicities and families into the parish community;
- ▶ recognizes the profound influence of popular culture on the formation of the person.

### **This catechetical leader has the skills necessary to:**

- ▶ provide, when necessary, catechetical programs that respect the culture and language of the recipients;
- ▶ articulate the truth of the Church's teachings;
- ▶ draw others into the rich treasure of the Church's teachings;
- ▶ help others to examine their beliefs in light of the unified whole of Church teaching.

---

## The Rapid Development of Technology

---

THE PEW RESEARCH CENTER and The Nielsen Company ratings note that 55 percent of Americans use the Internet every day and the average American spends 60 hours per month online.<sup>13</sup> Twenty years ago, personal computers resided on desks at home and/or at work. Fifteen years ago, laptops began to creep into daily usage. Today's personal computer can be a handheld device connected to the Internet. Technology today is no longer a compartmentalized activity; rather, it is immediately available and an all-pervading aspect of daily life.

On January 24, 2011, Pope Benedict XVI reminded us once again of the importance of embracing the Internet and the communication opportunities it offers for spreading the Good News, while also reminding us that human interaction must always be preserved and fostered.<sup>14</sup> The Church needs to advance the use of technology for the sake of the Gospel, and to understand and face the challenges inherent in its use.

What does the competent catechetical leader need to know about technology?

### **The Competent, Contemporary Catechetical Leader:**

- ▶ has a broad understanding of contemporary technology, its value and its challenges for evangelization and catechesis;
- ▶ embraces digital catechesis as a viable means for evangelization and catechesis;
- ▶ employs technology to transform and enhance all catechesis;
- ▶ accepts the challenge of, and actively participates in, learning new technologies;
- ▶ understands the impact of media, and new media in particular, on the formation of the individual.

### **This catechetical leader has the skills necessary to:**

- ▶ communicate the Gospel message in a manner easily accessible to “digital natives”;
- ▶ develop catechetical materials for use in a digital format;
- ▶ investigate and employ social media for the sake of catechesis.

Catechetical leaders have served the Church well. Across New York State there are many well-qualified and competent catechetical leaders who provide leadership for comprehensive catechetical programs and assure excellence in catechesis. In this new century, we have an obligation to continue to ensure that all catechetical leaders have the theological and pastoral competencies necessary for effective ministry. In addition, effective catechetical leaders will need particular skills in evangelization, as well as an understanding of today’s parish, the changing face of the family, cultural realities and the rapid development of technology in order to grow in their effectiveness.

We, the Bishops of New York State, commit ourselves to prepare today’s catechetical leader for the challenges he or she faces. We agree that formation for catechetical leaders must address the challenges noted above. We applaud our partners, the New York State Diocesan Directors of Religious Education, who have developed a comprehensive plan for this formation, which can be used and adapted to the respective particularities and needs of each of our dioceses. We pledge our support for all diocesan efforts to address the formation of the parish catechetical leader at the local level.

### **Endnotes**

- 1 United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, National Directory for Catechesis (NDC) (Washington, D.C.:USCCB, 2005), 2.
- 2 NDC, 54.
- 3 John Paul II, On Catechesis in Our Times (Catechesi Tradendae) (CT) (Washington, D.C.: USCCB, 1979), 2.
- 4 Ibid., 64.
- 5 NDC, 54.
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 USCCB: National Certification Standards for Lay Ecclesial Ministers.
- 9 NDC, 22.
- 10 Congregation for the Clergy, General Directory for Catechesis (GDC) (Washington, D.C.: USCCB, 1998), 254.
- 11 NDC, 226
- 12 NDC, 3.
- 13 Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, June 28, 2010, on Internet usage.
- 14 Pope Benedict XVI, Truth, Proclamation and Authenticity in the Digital Age, Jan. 24, 2011.



New York State Catholic Conference  
465 State Street, Albany, NY 12203-1004  
518.434.6195  
info@nyscatholic.org  
www.nyscatholic.org

