



FOR THE PASTOR

Engaging Your Parish More Actively in the Word of God

“**T**he Word of God in the Life and Mission of the Church,” the theme of the 2008 Synod of Bishops in Rome and of Catechetical Sunday 2008, presents a unique opportunity for you to focus more intentionally on the Word of God within your parish. This article will focus on ways that you can (1) plan with your staff for the coming catechetical year; (2) “kick off” that year with a great Catechetical Sunday and emphasize why that launch is so important; and (3) prepare your homily for Catechetical Sunday.

1. Planning for the Catechetical Year

In the spring, gather your staff—parochial vicar, director of religious education, school principal, youth minister, liturgy director—to begin the planning process. This year, gather around the table with this strategic question in mind: How do we receive the Word of God as alive and vibrant in the life and mission of this parish during the coming year?

There is a great hunger for the Word of God among the Catholic people. As the *Lineamenta*—the study document prepared for the 2008 Synod of Bishops—puts it: “In an increasing number of ways, people today are displaying a great need to listen to God and speak with him. At present, Christians are eagerly seeking the Word of God as the source of life and as a means of encountering the Lord in a personal manner” (Introduction, no. 2).

As you start your planning process, look at the present life of the parish. Where and when is Scripture presently being taught, prayed, and/or shared? How are the programs going? Can they be improved? How well is the Word of God proclaimed during the Liturgy? Are more lectors needed? Do they need more and/or better training? How can the homilies be focused on Christ and on Scripture? Are the reading citations printed in the bulletin? Do the lectors and liturgy committee members engage in Scripture study and sharing on the cycle of readings in order to prepare for their roles in the liturgy? Is the faith community encouraged to study the readings of the day before coming to Mass? Go in depth by referring to the Parish Checklist on the CD-ROM in this kit. You can measure your parish’s current practices against the complete list of questions found there.

Consider using one of the Sunday or weekday readings to begin every parish gathering. In addition to having catechumens and candidates break open the Sunday readings each

week, consider doing something similar for the children in Catholic school and religious education, as well as for their parents. Following the flow of the liturgical year is one of the principles of the baptismal catechumenate, and both the *General Directory for Catechesis* and the *National Directory for Catechesis* state that this principle is normative for all catechesis.

Several questions inspired by the *Lineamenta* seem especially appropriate to ask about your parish:

- How is the Word of God treated in all forms of catechesis, including Christian initiation and ongoing formation?
- How does the community give attention to and study the written Word of God?
- How is the Bible used with the various groups of people (children, adolescents, young people, and adults) in the parish?
- In what ways is Sacred Scripture taught?

As you consider these questions, also take a look at the life of the parish and the community. How is the Word of God lived in the parish community? What are the cultural and economic issues that affect how people live? How can the Word of God be used to reach people in these situations?

The answers to these kinds of questions, and an awareness of how the Word of God permeates the life of the parish, will serve you well in planning for the upcoming catechetical year.

2. Celebrating Catechetical Sunday

Celebrating Catechetical Sunday well can bring real benefits to the parish. First, it provides a public way to help you launch the catechetical year you have now planned and get it off to a rousing start. Make this yearly event a treasured parish tradition. Make it the time when you remind the entire faith community (through words and rituals) that catechesis—the handing on of the faith—is a critically important ministry of the Church, one that involves everyone and, by extension, the formation of all.

Although every baptized person has a responsibility to be a disciple and to give witness to the faith, some parishioners are called to hand on the faith in more formal ways, whether as parents, grandparents, or guardians, or as commissioned catechists in the Catholic school, religious education program, RCIA, or Scripture class.

Catechesis is a ministry that involves all ages; in some processes, such as the RCIA, catechesis runs year-round. Catechists catechize in the midst of, and with the prayers and support of, the faith community. The more support they receive from the community, the better they will be able to catechize. Catechesis is “a necessary, demanding task” of interpreting the Word of God in the Church (*Lineamenta*, Chapter 1). Catechetical Sunday is an opportunity to catechize the assembly about its role.

Promoting the Day

There are many helpful things that you can do to prepare for Catechetical Sunday.

1. Order the Catechetical Sunday kit in the spring. Order copies for yourself and for your staff. Familiarize yourself with all of the resources available in the book and CD-ROM. As part of your planning process, talk with your staff about the many ways that you might be able to use these resources during the coming year. Share the articles and resources with others in the parish who could benefit from them.
2. In the fall, hang the Catechetical Sunday posters (in Spanish and English) in the church, school, and other prominent places.
3. Order the *Prayer for Catechists* prayer cards. Distribute these after the Masses on Catechetical Sunday, and invite members of the parish community to pray daily for your catechists throughout the coming year.
4. Bless all catechists at the Masses on Catechetical Sunday. Include a blessing for parents and guardians, who play such an important role in handing on the faith.
5. Include a prayer for catechists in the Prayer of the Faithful at Mass. Use catechists as lectors and for the presentation of the gifts.
6. Present the catechists with a small gift or certificate of commissioning to show that the parish values their work. Some parishes go so far as to have a luncheon or brunch for all parish catechists following the last Mass on Catechetical Sunday.
7. Promote Catechetical Sunday for at least three weeks prior to the event to let parishioners know that something important is happening. Advertise the date and time of the Mass at which you plan to do the blessing.
8. Send personal invitations to the catechists and their families to attend any special Mass. Be sure to include all catechists: not just the ones who teach children, but also those catechists who teach adults, including RCIA and Scripture study.
9. Use the artwork from Catechetical Sunday on all of your promotional materials and on other print materials throughout the year to keep the theme in front of people.

Prepare and celebrate a wonderful liturgy. Send the message: catechesis is important. The Word of God is vibrant and alive!

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3. Planning the Homily

Now that you have met with your catechetical staff to plan for Catechetical Sunday and the coming catechetical year, it's time to prepare your homily for Catechetical Sunday. What can you say in a brief amount of time to explain the purpose and importance of catechesis within the Church, why we celebrate Catechetical Sunday, why catechists are blessed, your own enthusiasm for catechesis, and the importance of the theme “The Word of God in the Life and Mission of the Church”—and, oh yes, connect this all to the Sunday readings?

While difficult, this is not an impossible task. Here are a few thoughts to help you in your preparation.

1. Pastors and parochial vicars are called to be the “catechist of catechists” (*Directory on the Ministry and Life of Priests*, no. 47). Deacons also are called to serve in the ministry of the Word. What does it mean to you to share the Catholic faith with others? What responsibility are you handing on to the catechists whom you will commission?
2. Catechists are responsible for “breaking open” the Word of God for your parishioners. They are to be proclaimers of the Word; they are called to catechize systematically; they are called to live the Word. They are part of a 2,000-year tradition of handing on the faith. They are called to all this by virtue of their Baptism. They are part of the life and mission of the Church, and of this local church.
3. Parents, grandparents, and guardians are also called to live the Word and hand on the faith. They are part of that same tradition by virtue of their Baptism. All of this is true of the baptized assembly as well. All continue to be nourished in this faith by Jesus, both in the Scriptures and in the Eucharist.
4. Tell of a time when you have heard a familiar story from Scripture in a new way, or of a time when you heard a Gospel passage and were led by that passage to make a change in your life. What did this experience mean for you? What have you learned from it?
5. Introduce the theme for the coming catechetical year, “The Word of God in the Life and Mission of the Church.” Explain briefly how the parish is planning to implement this theme over the coming months. Tell how these catechists who are to be commissioned will help the parish live out this theme.
6. For the conclusion of your homily, borrow from the concluding thoughts of the *Lineamenta*: “A fervent listening to the Word is fundamental to a personal encounter with God. Living according to the Spirit results from making room for the Word and allowing it to be born in one’s heart” (Conclusion, no. 33).
7. Be sure to end with a “thank you” for everyone who is involved in bringing the Catholic faith to others through their words and their living, especially those who are catechists.

REFERENCE

- Congregation for the Clergy. *Directory on the Ministry and Life of Priests*. Washington, DC: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1994.