

The Catechist and the Spiritual Journey



THE SETTING

The resource, *At Home with God's People – Our Catholic Faith*, has been prepared with the understanding that its sessions will be conducted in a small group.

This is because our experience of adult faith development has shown that the small group setting is most effective where the objective is faith sharing, rather than, say, cognitive learning.

A 'small group' is one of 6-10 people, and would consist – in this context – of two or three catechumens their sponsors and the catechist.

It is assumed that the group has been formed after prayerful discernment. It is also assumed that there are clear links established and maintained between the group and the pastor. In many cases these tasks – discernment of group membership and the maintaining of links with the pastor – will be done by a group in the parish – the 'Team' – who

have the responsibility for pastoral oversight of the catechumenate. Their role includes support for the group and the catechist, sharing information, arranging for books or other materials, organising rituals, etc. It assumes, too, that there is continuity of membership in the group, such that trust and cohesion can develop.

In other words, the setting for this resource is a form of basic Christian community.

In this setting, the resource aims to support the group – catechist, catechumens and sponsors – in the catechumenate phase of the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (or Order of Christian Initiation of Adults).

The resource is not intended for other phases of the RCIA – Inquiry, Purification and Enlightenment (season of Lent) or Mystagogy (Easter season). Each of these has its own agenda, its own purpose and style, its own pastoral response.

PHASES AND MAJOR RITES

The phases and rites together form a process which unfolds in this way:

PHASE 1: The Inquiry. This first phase, as its name suggests, is a time of questioning and discovery. It may have been going on for months or years before any formal contact is made with the Church.

Formal times of inquiry in a parish, provide opportunities for inquirers to have their questions addressed, to reflect on how their lives may be illumined by the Good News of the Gospel, and to decide if their journey is leading them towards membership in the Church.

RITUAL MOMENT. Rite of Acceptance into the Order of Catechumens. This is the first major rite of the RCIA and is celebrated (usually at a Sunday Mass) with those inquirers who may now decide to begin the process of becoming Catholics. It is a ritual statement by them that they intend their journey of faith to be within this Church community, and it is a ritual statement by the community that they will welcome, accompany and support these candidates on that journey.

PHASE 2: The Catechumenate. This phase is described in more detail shortly. It is where the catechist's role begins.

RITUAL MOMENT.

The Rite of Election. As the season of Lent approaches, all those involved (catechist, sponsor, catechumen, etc.) will be asked to reflect prayerfully (discern) on the catechumen's readiness to receive the sacraments of initiation – Baptism, Confirmation, Eucharist. This discernment will probably be co-ordinated by the Team.

Those who are then found to be ready will celebrate this major rite, which is their statement of readiness for the sacraments, and the Church's statement – in God's name – that they are called (elected) to receive these sacraments.

PHASE 3. Purification and Enlightenment. During the season of Lent this is a time of prayerful preparation for the great events of Easter. The emphasis here is less on teaching, and more on the scriptures of these Sundays and their liturgies. There are Scrutinies, Presentations of the Creed and Our Father, as well as the great liturgies of Holy Thursday, Good Friday and Easter Saturday (the Triduum).

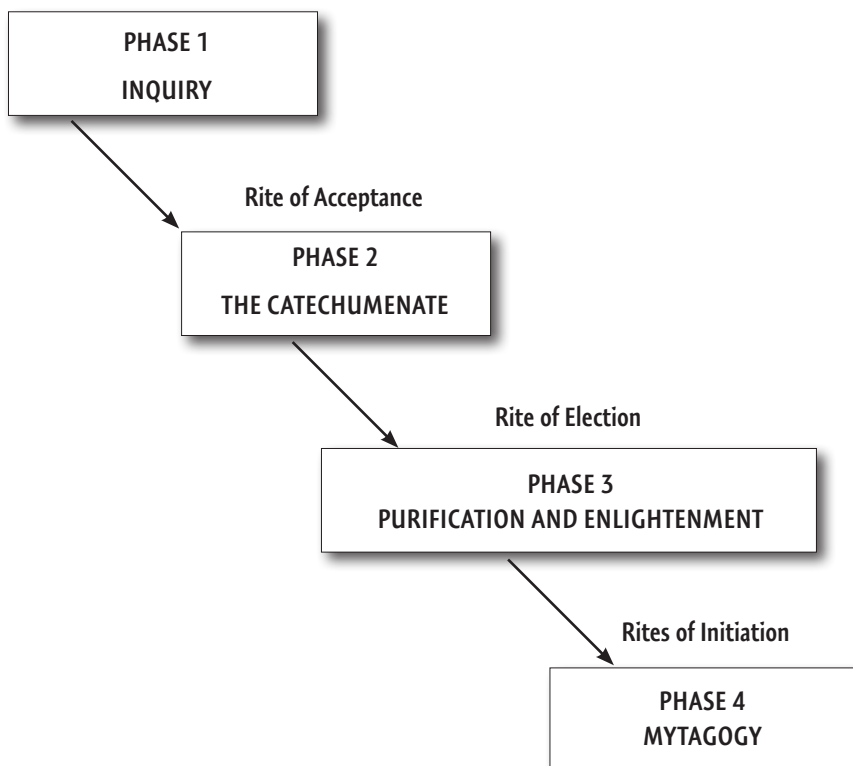
The catechist's role here is important, though in a different mode, since 'this is a period of more intense spiritual preparation, consisting more in interior reflection than in catechetical instruction.' (RCIA 126)

RITUAL MOMENT. Sacraments of Initiation. The candidates' journey reaches its climax in the great rituals of the Easter Vigil, where, in the midst of the community, they will be baptised (or received into full communion if they are already baptised), confirmed, and come to the table of Eucharist.

This initiation of new members renews the Church and all her members, as she comes to be Mother once more.

PHASE 4. Mystagogy (Post-baptismal catechesis). This is a period of ongoing reflection and discovery. Sharing fully now in the sacraments, the new members of the Church reflect on God's goodness in their journey, and look to ways in which they can continue to be part of the ongoing life of the community. The catechist's role is again most important, though again in a different mode.

The diagram below represents the RCIA journey.



THE CATECHUMENATE

The official text – The Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (R.C.I.A.) – describes this catechumenate period as a time of ‘pastoral formation’, which includes four elements:

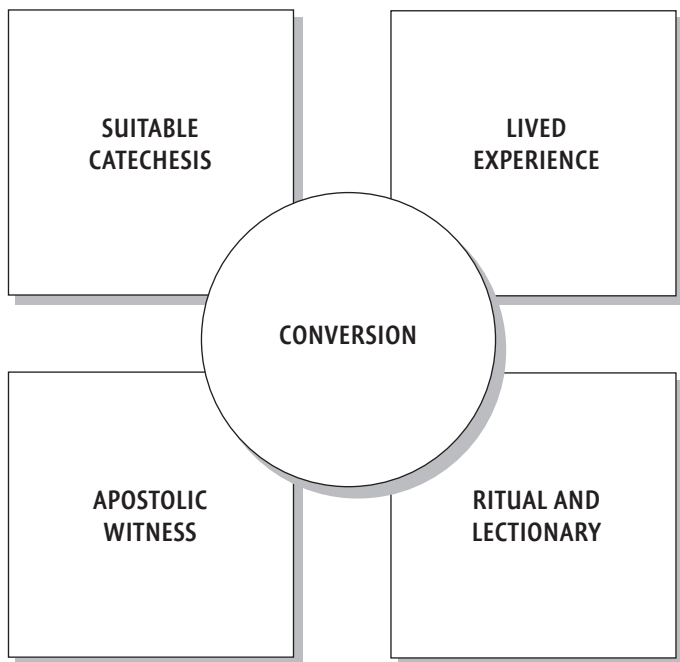
- A ‘suitable catechesis’ ... that is ‘planned to be gradual and complete in its coverage’ and ‘accommodated to the liturgical year’.
- Lived experience of the Christian way of life, by which they learn to ‘turn more readily to God in prayer, to bear witness to the

faith’, and ‘to practise love of neighbour’. These bring about ‘a progressive change of outlook and conduct’.

- ‘Suitable liturgical rites’ which purify and strengthen the candidates, and celebrations of the word of God, especially the Liturgy of the Word at Mass.
- ‘Working actively with others to spread the Gospel and build up the Church’.

(RCIA 75)

This is represented in the diagram below:



At the heart of this pastoral formation is conversion, which is both a turning from (sin, unbelief, emptiness) and a turning to God.

The text puts it this way:

‘The rite ... is designed for adults who, after hearing the mystery of Christ proclaimed, consciously and freely seek the living God and enter the way of faith and conversion as the Holy Spirit opens their hearts.’ (RCIA 1)

And again:

‘The time spent in the catechumenate should be long enough – several years if necessary – for the conversion and faith of the catechumens to become strong.’ (RCIA 76)

So conversion is central to the whole process, and it occurs as people become more aware of, or more attentive to:

- the reality that God is always present and active in our lives.
- the further reality that God – in this loving presence and activity – is always calling us, drawing us to something beyond ourselves. (Jesus called this ‘fulness of life’.)

There are two other aspects:

- As we become aware of this presence and this calling of God, we respond from the human

reality of where we are, not from where someone else feels we ought to be.

- Our response – with all its gifts and weaknesses – is influenced and supported by the people close to us in the journey.

THE CATECHIST

The role of the catechist then, is to nurture God’s work of conversion in each catechumen and candidate, and to do this by drawing on the four ‘sources’:

- suitable catechesis
- lived experience of the Christian life
- ritual and scripture, and
- apostolic witness

Each of these is important. To omit any one is to diminish the effectiveness of the entire pastoral formation.

Thus, to simply ‘work through’ the teaching presented in this resource, with no attention to the lived experience of the catechumens – their needs, questions and insights – is inadequate. Similarly, to focus entirely on their needs and questions, with no reference to a ‘suitable catechesis’, or adrift from the lectionary and the rhythm of the liturgical year, is also inadequate; so too, is a catechesis which is divorced from the practical work of the local Church as it strives to spread the Gospel.

The role of the catechist, then, is to provide the kind of environment for the group

- where individual conversion paths are nurtured;
- where each of the ‘sources’ for formation can be addressed;
- where connections can be made between these sources as opportunities arise.

THE RESOURCE

At Home with God’s People is an attempt to provide clear teaching for the ‘orderly catechesis’ that is called for.

In its 25 topics major truths and important themes are addressed for people reflecting on being Catholic Christians in our world of today. Obviously, this list is far from exhaustive; there are many other topics that could have been included and are not. If any such omission becomes obvious for an individual or a group, then we hope as the group leader you will find other material to fill that gap and address their need.

It is important to remember that conversion is only partly about information – eg the ‘content’ of the 25 topics. The book also provides suggestions and activities to help the catechumens and candidates keep in touch with key aspects of their journey of faith –

- their own lived experience,

- their practice of prayer,
- their deeper acquaintance with the Scriptures,
- the week-to-week richness of the Sunday Gospel,
- the down-to-earth attempts of their local church to help God’s kingdom come.

USING THE RESOURCE

- Ensure all participants have their books before the first meeting. If possible point out to them the preparation for the meeting page on page 9 for the first topic and invite them to spend some time reading and reflecting. Each week the participants are invited to ‘reflect’ on their own lived experience of the topic being considered. They may need some assistance to find scripture quotes in their Bible. Allay any concerns they may have about the meetings. Check that they know where to come and the time (both beginning and ending) of the meeting.

Time spent sharing on these reflections, when the group comes together, will be extremely useful for the catechist in finding where people are, what their questions and needs are in regard to the topic, and thus how the material may be best approached.

Further, this sharing of reflection and subsequent discussion on the topic may indicate that the group is moving towards another area of church teaching, which may occur much later in the actual list of contents. Alert catechists will note this, and suggest that the group looks at the topic on marriage for next meeting, instead of the topic on Mary, for example.

- Each topic has some suggestions about praying. These too, if shared appropriately, can give indicators to an attentive catechist about what is happening in their journey of faith, and what directions may be suggested.
- The 'listen' part of each topic is a wonderful opportunity for candidates to find their way through their Bibles and to come to prayerful reflection on the passages suggested. Spending time in the group on sharing these reflections on the scriptures can be most rewarding, and is further encouragement to them to devote time to it in preparation for the group meeting.
- Another suggestion for each session is that they spend time with the Gospel of the following Sunday, reading it prayerfully and making connections with

their own life. This carries several possibilities:

- In preparation, the catechist may note an obvious link between the Sunday Gospel – especially for some of the major feasts – and one of the topics for catechesis. This, too, can result in a suggested reordering of the sequence. E.g. 'next Sunday is Corpus Christi, let's focus on Eucharist'.
 - The catechist could help this reflection on the Sunday Gospel by giving the group a reflection sheet with a couple of specific questions to help them. (An example is given on pages 18,19.) This would need to be prepared beforehand, (by the catechist, or by a few catechists planning together, or by someone on the parish Catechumenate team).
 - A reading of the previous Sunday's Gospel – or phrases from it – could well be the focal point of the opening time of prayer in each session.
- Encourage participants to have a journal or notebook. Each week they can write responses to the 'Reflect' section, 'Listen', 'Pray' and 'Worship' sections. Encourage them to take notes as they read the topic during the week – also to 'highlight' and mark the text in the book. Any questions or issues that arise as

they read can also be written in the journal and then shared with the group. One teaching strategy is to delegate different sections of the topic to members of the group. Ask them to bring to the next meeting a brief summary of the section and to share the main points with the group.

These can be of great assistance to the catechist and sponsor in 'being attentive', as well as being of value to all the members of the group.

- At the end of each topic there is a brief section: the 'yellow box'. This includes a prayer which may be used to conclude the meeting and references to the Catholic Catechism. The numbers refer to paragraph or section numbers which are indicated throughout the text of the Catechism. The 'Share' section provides some questions that may be of assistance in the discussion/sharing part of the meeting.

All of the above suggests that at some meetings, the catechesis proposed in the book does not get treated, because the group has spent so much of its time:

- praying out of the Sunday's Gospel;
- sharing their reflections on their experience of the topic for this session;

- sharing on how they found the prayer suggestions;
- sharing their reflections on their reading of God's Word;
- simply tabling what is happening to them in their journey;
- recording the apostolic witness they may have been involved in, during the week.

If the central agenda is conversion, then this seems to have been a very profitable meeting, outweighing the importance of treating some part of the *At Home with God's People* book. Catechists will need to be attentive to all the possibilities, and to be quite comfortable with meetings like this.

So much of this role consists in being attentive. It is one of the most important qualities for a catechist to have, or to develop. And since conversion is an expression of God's gracious love at work in the individual, another key quality is prayerfulness – a being aware of God's action in our lives and the lives of others.

INDIVIDUAL DIFFERENCES

Another area that the catechist will soon be aware of, and then attentive to, is the differences that exist in the group.

Some will be quiet, drawing their energy from within. These introverts will possibly enjoy the suggestions for reflection and prayer, but then may find it difficult to express to the group what it has meant to them. The catechist, noting their relative silence in the group, will find appropriate ways to ensure they are incorporated into the sharing: perhaps a quiet question, then sufficient pause to allow them to 'go inside' and reflect before answering.

Some on the other hand, are extroverts, drawing their energy from the outer world. These may find the reflections and prayer exercises more difficult, and may need to be reminded and encouraged. Extroverts will often do their thinking by talking, which can result in their dominating the group's sharing time. The alert catechist will find appropriate ways to address this: perhaps inviting the group to spend a minute in quiet reflection before responding to a question, then inviting one of the quieter ones to respond first.

It can sometimes happen that, even when a catechist has tried several things, one person may continue to have a disruptive influence on the group. The catechist may need to take counsel here – from another catechist, from someone on the team, from someone who understands people – and decide on

a firmer course of action. This may involve having a conversation with the person away from the meeting, pointing out the disruptive nature of their behaviour, reminding them of the basic purpose of the group – to nurture conversion – and coming to some arrangement. If all else fails, the person may have to be asked to leave the group and be accommodated elsewhere. Fortunately, this is quite rare, given the motivation of the people who comprise a catechumenate group.

FORMAT FOR THE SESSIONS

Leaders of small groups quickly come to discover that no two meetings are the same – different questions, different needs, different atmospheres, etc. However, with these variations assumed, a general format for these sessions is proposed as follows:

1. **A time of gathering, welcoming and inclusion.** This could be 5-10 minutes before the meeting, and the first couple of minutes into the meeting. (It is important to establish the habit in the group of beginning and ending on time).
2. **Prayer.** A time when the group is asked to become quiet, and deepen their awareness of God's loving presence and activity – in each of them, and in the group gathered. It can also be a time

when they are asked to make sure they have ‘arrived’, and are not still engaged with the issues of the day.

In this reflective and attentive climate, passages or phrases from the previous Sunday’s Gospel will often provide the bread for prayer, either spoken or not. It may also lead to some sharing.

The prayer included at the beginning of each chapter of the book can also be used here – perhaps to conclude the prayer time.

While this may take 5-10 minutes it may sometimes go longer, with the catechist sensing when the praying has finished and something else – like a discussion – has begun, indicating a move to the next part. As trust builds in the group invite participants to be involved in preparing the prayer.

3. **Sharing of Experience.** The group is now asked to share the discoveries, insights, questions, etc., that have emerged from their preparation for the meeting.

They have already been encouraged to spend time on the ‘Reflect’ and ‘Pray’ suggestions in the book, perhaps writing

down ideas or questions that arose. It is this preparation that is now shared, always with the understanding that they share only that which they are comfortable about divulging.

Sometimes this may occupy only 5 minutes, at other times it may occupy most of the rest of the session, the catechist determining whether to let it run, or to move on.

When the group becomes more familiar with the Bible (and for a start, the catechist may need to help them by showing them where to find the passages) their sharing of what they have found in their reading and prayerful reflection can be most valuable. Again, the time spent on this will vary, with the catechist deciding when to move on.

5. **The Catechesis input.** This is where the group’s attention is directed to the actual catechesis of the topic.

The catechist’s gifts, the group’s needs and the time available will mean that this can be approached in a variety of ways.

- The catechist may give an overview of the topic, directing the group’s attention to key parts of the

text, and inviting discussion or clarification.

- The catechist may give a brief overview or introduction, linking the teaching to some of the ideas or themes that have emerged in the sharing, and then begin the topic.
- The group may be invited to spend some time reading the text of the input, then move into a discussion of the questions or insights that this may provide.
- The input can take the form of a video or DVD that the catechist finds relevant to the topic. The text provided here then simply becomes background reading.

The catechist needs to be comfortable with the fact that the input may not be completed at the session.

The catechesis input is *one* of the sources of conversion, and is not somehow more important than the others.

Learning the faith is, after all, a life-long task, and not to have completed a session 'on time' is hardly a major problem. The topic can be concluded later in the group, or the group can complete the study with their

own individual reading. If the topic is important for the group, then the next session could be devoted to this further exploration.

6. Conclusion. Some 5 to 10 minutes before the session is scheduled to conclude, (and always try to finish on time!) the catechist will round off the discussion or sharing, and direct the group's attention to the next session. This will involve such matters as:

- Suggesting what the next topic will be. (This could be the next in sequence, or a later topic suggested by the group's needs here and now, or a topic suggested by the liturgical cycle, etc.)
- Reminding the group of the importance of their work between sessions: jotting down their insights and questions, spending time on the personal reflection and praying suggestions for the next session and reflecting on the 'Listen' section.
- Suggesting some work of apostolic witness that the candidates could be involved in during the week: accompanying someone in the parish in their ministry, (St. V. De Paul visits,

Communion to the sick, etc) or becoming involved with social issues in the neighbourhood, or perhaps jointly, as a group, agreeing to do something together to witness to the gospel.

7. **Concluding Prayer.** Sometimes, the way the meeting has developed will suggest to the catechist an appropriate prayer by way of conclusion.

The ritual (RCIA) contains several blessing prayers for the candidates, and the catechist may find one or other of these a fitting concluding prayer.

A final word from the text:

‘Catechists ... have an important office for the progress of the catechumens and for the growth of the community.

When they are teaching, catechists should see that their instruction is filled with the spirit of the Gospel, adapted to ... the cycle of the Church’s year, suited to the needs of catechumens, and as far as possible enriched by local traditions.’
(RCIA 16)

GOSPEL REFLECTION

First Sunday of Lent

Then Jesus was led by the spirit out into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. He fasted for forty days and forty nights, after which he was very hungry, and the tempter came and said to him, 'If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to turn into loaves.'

But he replied, 'Scripture says:

Man does not live on bread alone

but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.'

The devil then took him to the holy city and made him stand on the parapet of the Temple. 'If you are the Son of God' he said 'throw yourself down; for scripture says:

He will put you in his angels' charge,

and they will support you on their hands

in case you hurt your foot against a stone.'

Jesus said to him, 'Scripture also says:

You must not put the Lord your God to the test.'

Next, taking him to a very high mountain, the devil showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendour. 'I

will give you all these' he said 'if you fall at my feet and

worship me.' Then Jesus replied, 'Be off, Satan! For scripture says:

You must worship the Lord your God,

and serve him alone.'

Then the devil left him, and angels appeared and looked after him.

(Matt. 4:1-11)

Discussion points

- It's comforting to see Jesus struggling with temptations just as we do. And reassuring to know the same Spirit is with us, when we lean towards taking the easy way out.
- What 'desert' do you find yourself in at the moment? How conscious are you of the Spirit being with you?
- The 40 days of Lent have begun. How do you plan to be in solidarity with Jesus? Fasting? Prayer? Alms-giving?

Reflective process

In preparing the questions, these ideas of Father Ray Kemp (Washington) may help you:

1. What did you hear?
What thoughts, phrases, and images stood out from Scripture?
2. What does it mean?
Why did certain thoughts, phrases, and images strike you? Were there events in your life that were somewhat similar to the events in the Scripture reading? What questions do the Scriptures raise about life, faith, or Church?
3. What will it cost you to live the message of today's Scripture?
What are you being called to? What are the obstacles to living the call?