

Basics of Teen and Adult Faith Formation

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Stanley D. Williams, Ph.D.

November 23, 2007

"Dear Stan. I am a Catechist for 17 ninth graders. What would you suggest for me, the Catechist, that will grab their attention, and get them involved. Right now, they're staring back at me as if the lights are on but nobody is home. I need something that will give them a piece of our Faith in order to build a good Catholic Foundation for their Confirmation next year."

Dear Catechist: Here are some ideas that will work with any religious education curriculum and any age. They are based on the very successful practices of our Evangelical brothers and sisters.

Run your Catechism class like Evangelicals run Sunday School class. I'm not suggesting you change curriculum; but rather run your class as a relationship building experience between you, your students, their parents, and God. Christian discipleship is mostly about profound personal relationships, which is developed by a combination of both faith (trust in another) and reason (knowing the other). The object is Christ, with you as the role model.

Proper catechesis (or discipleship) develops the student (child, teen, or adult) in both faith and reason, trust and knowledge. That is, proper instruction affects the mind and the heart. The mind is reached through the development of reason, the heart is reached through the development of trust.

In our experience there are five practical components to a sound spiritual formation program for youth. For instructors, we can break them down into these five actionable categories: in class, out of class, with parents or spouses, with students individually, and before God.

1. In Class

A. Make the lesson material personal by engaging students in discussion and asking the following kind of questions: (1) What does the text (textbook, Bible, Catechism) literally say? (2) What does it mean practically in terms of your student's lives and what they do? (3) What examples from their real life can they tell the class about? (4) What questions does the text create in your student's mind?

B. Be prepared to lead the discussion by telling personal stories about yourself and your extended family or children. Then ask them to share from their personal lives. Encourage them to ask you hard questions, and be prepared to give them practical (how-to-live) answers. Do not judge them, but do guide them. Help them.

C. Always, in a group, lead them in a time of prayer. Ask for prayer requests, and get the kids to pray for each other extemporaneously. "Dear God, please help Jack to study well, and pass the test next week that he's worried about." "Dear Jesus, give Mary the strength to help her mother through this terrible illness." As much as I love the potency of the written prayers of the Church, get people to pray conversationally from their heart.

D. Make your class times intimate, compassionate times of applying the lesson to their specific lives...not just the lives of the stories described in the text.

E. Try a schedule like this. It will draw your class in, get them involved, and listening better to the lesson. 1. Lead them in singing a hymn. 2. Take prayer requests 3. Lead them in group prayer. 4. Present the lesson with examples from scripture, the catechism, and your life. 5. Lead a discussion about applying the lesson to their lives. What worked and didn't work from last week? You don't have to have all the answers; as the students will be able to answer each other. 6. Close in prayer and a song.

F. Incorporate Bible drills every class time. Each student should have their own leather Bible. At the beginning of class divide them up into teams. Before you give them a Bible reference verse, have them hold their Bibles in their hand(s) above their heads. Give them the verse (Psalms 101:4). The first person to find it jumps to their feet and reads it aloud. Give points to the teams, and over a period of time, treat the winners to some prize. Or do the same thing with the catechism. The passages you have them look up should have to do with the lesson...or with something they're learning in their real life. Check out Bible Quizzing. We need a Catholic Bible Quiz Organization. Who will start it?

2. Out of Class

A. Schedule events, parties, outings as a class at least once a month where you just have fun together and learn about each other and learn to trust each other. In other words build a small trusting community.

B. Start a prayer chain by email, text messaging, or telephone. When someone has a prayer request for something important, you start the chain, and get everyone praying for the need.

C. Start an e-mail list, where during the week you send them encouragement, a poem, some good news item. Something that will create buzz among the group so when they get together they'll be ready to talk and share. (Let parents know what you're up to.)

D. Attend their special events, sports events, plays, concerts, or things your students are into. Of course you have to ask them what they are doing so you know. Be personally involved in their lives.

E. Get the students involved in a service project, in helping the unfortunate. Afterwards, get together and share the insights, and then pray for the people you helped. What did the experience teach about life?

3. With Parents (or Spouses)

A. In the case of children and teens, communicate regularly with parents. Talk to each student's mom, dad or guardian once a month in person or by phone. Keep a list. Ask how they are doing, and what you can pray for. Offer suggestions and observations about their child from your perspective. The important thing here is to keep the parents informed about what you're doing, and let them know you're concerned.

In the case of spouses, usually both will be in your class together. If not, find a reason to call or meet the spouse and ask about them, and invite them to class functions or meetings. Let the invitations come from YOU, not just the attending spouse.

B. Encourage and remind parents to pray regularly with their child. Not just at dinner, not just before bed...although those are musts. The bishops remind us (and it's a given in Evangelicalism) that parents are the first line of religious and faith instruction. If it doesn't happen at home, the catechists and pastors will have a tough time. Is there a set time at home for daily Bible reading (the readings for the day), spiritual discussion, and prayer? While praying the rosary as a family is a great exercise, if that's all you do, then it doesn't offer opportunities for praying personally for and with your kids. Saying the Rosary can be rote and not engage the spirit. Pray the Rosary out of love and adoration of Christ, not just to do something.

4. With Students Individually

On a regular occasion make time to spend time with students individually (face-to-face, not via email or text messaging). Show your interest for them. With children or teens, never do this alone or in private. Your relationship with your students will help them form an idea of what their relationship should be like with God. Can they trust you? They need to trust God. You are becoming their spiritual advisor. You are not their confessor, but you should keep track for each kid and see that they are being responsible for daily prayer, helping others, getting to Mass, studying the Bible (Catechism lessons), and getting to confession. You can't make them, but if you ask them individually in a semi-private and confidential way, and then follow up with their parents. You will have helped them wonderfully form their faith.

5. Before God

A. Pray the names of each student before the Blessed Sacrament, or at least in private prayer at home, each night before you go to bed. Where you know about needs, pray for them specifically, asking God, his angels, and saints to intervene.

B. Fast regularly for your students, that the evil influences of this world—addictions, exposure to demonic forces, wrong headed friends, recreational drugs, sexual lasciviousness, and anything that takes them away from God — be taken away from influencing their lives.

C. Take ideas you come across (such as this list, or the ideas in my other blogs such as How to Start a Sunday School), and pray them before the Blessed Sacrament. Ask God for wisdom about how to teach your class.

Change the World

This list is a good starting place. But continue to pray over, evaluate and improve what it is you do. Culture changes, as do students, regardless of their age. Kids change because they are learning so much and because their hormones are usually in some weird state of imbalance. Adults change because their kids do, their jobs come and go, and family are on the move. All of that change, however, will help you establish relationships with those you love and serve. In that way you model what it means to love God and your neighbor, and you'll help to form Christians who can change the world.