

# Walk with Me: Accompanying Children in Faith

BY JOSEPH D. WHITE

“Young people today need role models of discipleship . . . A commitment to live what we teach so we can mentor by example can help us to cultivate what is perhaps our most important tool as catechists—a witness of the faith in daily life.”



ACCOMPANIMENT HAS BEEN A POPULAR TOPIC in catechesis for the past several years, and rightfully so. The *Directory for Catechesis* lists “accompanier” as one of the primary roles of the catechist, adding, “the catechist is an expert in the art of accompaniment.”<sup>1</sup> In his apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* (“The Joy of the Gospel”), Pope Francis defines accompaniment as a process of walking with the other, listening, and leading

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1 Pontifical Council for the Promotion of the New Evangelization, *Directory for Catechesis* (Washington, DC: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2020), no. 113.

others “ever closer to God.”<sup>2</sup> The image of walking together is a particularly salient one as we think about children’s catechesis,



since children (especially young children) often literally walk hand-in-hand with an adult in most places, especially unfamiliar ones. We walk with children for a variety of reasons: we want to make sure they go in the right direction and don’t get lost along the way; we want them to feel safe; we

want to make sure they don’t miss things that will form them and excite their imaginations. But most of all, we walk with children because we love them, and we know that people grow best when that growth occurs in the context of relationship.

## Getting to Know You

How can catechists of children walk with young people in a spiritual sense as they are formed in the faith? One way is by getting to know our learners. Look for resources on the cognitive, social, moral, and spiritual development of children in the age group you teach. This information, which can sometimes be found in the catechist manual accompanying a religious education curriculum, can offer a starting point for understanding the thinking and developmental needs of your learners.

Even as we understand what’s typical for children at a particular age, it’s important to remember that every child is different and to get to know the individual child. Listening to the individual experiences, hopes, dreams, and interests of our learners can help us present the faith as relevant to their lives. It might be

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2 Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 170.

helpful to begin each session with icebreaker questions or games that allow learners to share something about themselves and their interests. Think of questions that begin with phrases like, “Tell about a time when you . . .” or “What is your favorite . . .” In today’s hectic and noisy world, too often we fail to take time with one another, to listen without worrying about what *we* will say next. Accompanying children means sitting with them, listening to the words they speak, and reflecting on the feelings behind the words. It means recognizing what a gift we are being given when little ones trust us with their stories. It means being present to children as a reminder that God is present with them.

### The Importance of Forming Questions

Nothing engages us in learning and formation more than curiosity and wonder. If we don’t have any questions about a topic, we don’t get excited about learning more. Very often in catechesis with children and teens, we provide answers before our learners have asked the questions. Helping those to whom we minister form their questions is an important part of the learning process because it helps our learners anticipate and get excited about seeking the answers.

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One way to do this is to begin with a brief proclamation of the topic, such as a developmentally appropriate passage of Scripture connected with the topic to be explored in the session. First, we can take a modified *lectio divina* approach, asking learners to share what they hear God saying to them through the Scripture. Next, we can ask another critical question: “What do you wonder about this?” Children sometimes need some help forming their questions, so you might want to have some sample questions ready. For example, if your session is on the Holy

Trinity and you have just read the Gospel account of the baptism of the Lord, a question you could model might be, “How are the Father (whose voice we hear when Jesus is baptized), the Son, and the Holy Spirit (who we see descending like a dove in this passage) all connected with one another?” or, “What does it mean that God is three, yet also one?”

## Witnesses to the Gospel

Another important part of accompaniment is cultivating our own spiritual maturity and listening to God’s call in our lives and work so we can be effective witnesses. In *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis states, “Today more than ever we need men and women who, on the basis of their experience of accompanying others, are familiar with processes which call for prudence, understanding, patience and docility to the Spirit.”<sup>3</sup> Young people today need role models of discipleship. They often find their heroes in questionable places, from internet influencers and gamers to actors, musicians, and athletes. Oftentimes, these individuals fall short of offering an effective example to follow. A commitment to live what we teach so we can mentor by example can help us to cultivate what is perhaps our most important tool as catechists—a witness of the faith in daily life.

Likewise, we can point young people to the many saints who lived courageous lives of virtue even in childhood and adolescence—faithful young men and women like Ss. Jacinta and Francisco Marto, Bl. Imelda Lambertini, St. José Sánchez del Río, St. Clare of Assisi, and Bl. Carlo Acutis, just to name a few. Ultimately, our pattern for living is the person of Jesus Christ, but we are encouraged by the examples of imperfect people like ourselves who, through God’s grace, became the women and men they were created to be.

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3 Ibid., no. 171.

## Learning and Re-learning Humility

Finally, accompanying children means learning to be humble. We mustn't see ourselves as the "experts." After all, it's the Holy Spirit who is the pedagogue, guiding each individual toward the truth as we walk alongside our learners sharing the witness of the faith.

We must understand that, while we might know some things our young learners haven't yet mastered, we are all still growing. (And, in fact,

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Jesus points to *children* as examples of how *we* need to grow—see Mt 18:3). As we learn humility, we understand that God has the same love for each one of us. God loves each of us with a full, passionate, and unselfish love. In fact, God's love for us is the only bond that unites all of humanity, the one thing each of us has in common with the other.

One of the beautiful things about our Catholic Church is that none of us are called to come to faith alone. As we walk together with one another, and especially with the littlest among us, we experience the truth that "where two or three are gathered" in his name, God is always with us (Mt 18:20).

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