

# Teaching Variations: How Catechesis Changes in Each of the Four Periods

BY WILLIAM J. KEIMIG

“It is the grace that comes from a sacramental, liturgical life that allows the neophytes (and all the faithful) to live a life of charity and to pursue holiness. It is a time to learn what it means to be glorified and what it means to be holy.”



THE CATECHETICAL ASPECT OF THE Order of Christian Initiation of Adults (OCIA) is inseparable from the practical reality it seeks to inform. It is the work of teaching the faith so as to empower people to truly live it in their daily experience. Catechetical sessions cannot be nebulous or theoretical; they must be real and applicable to participants. To give a suitable and complete presentation of the Gospel and the full deposit of faith to those who are considering becoming Catholic means that participants gain a solid hold on what they are taught, and they need to *know* they have a hold on it. This is only possible if the truths are taught so as to *move* participants—to foster change—in

their interior life of adoration and acceptance of the divine will. This must be so in their actions, their participation in the life



of the Church, their married and family lives, their professional lives, and their economic and social responsibilities. In the truths that the catechist gradually unveils, participants discover their deepest

aspirations fulfilled; they find what they are seeking and they find it superabundantly (GDC 55).<sup>1</sup>

Therefore, OCIA catechesis, echoing down that which has been revealed by God, must be wholly directed to the conversion of the hearts and minds of participants, allowing for the flexibility demanded by differing pastoral circumstances in parishes from year to year and using a learning model suited to adults of various faith backgrounds.<sup>2</sup> This article seeks to present how that effort of conversion is fostered through a gradual work of catechesis ordered to the liturgical year and the gateways of initiation.

## **Catechesis in the Precatechumenate: Laying Out the Framework of the Gospel**

Catechesis in the pre-catechumenate is quite distinctive. The catechetical components of this period flow from the need to set out a framework upon which can be laid the full structure of the deposit of faith in the next period. For the next period to be truly systematic and organic, all the necessary elements must be put into place during the pre-catechumenate:

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<sup>1</sup> Congregation for the Clergy, *General Directory for Catechesis* (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1998), cited as GDC in text.

<sup>2</sup> See Sacred Congregation for the Clergy, *General Catechetical Directory* (1971), nos. 18, 24.

- The Gospel is expressed carefully and completely, by means of testimonies and explanations of Scripture, building out God's plan in salvation history (OCIA 38).<sup>3</sup>
- Answers are given to the most pressing and obvious questions of the inquirers (OCIA 38).
- Teachings must adequately prepare them for the first major rites and content of the process, as well as the daily living of Catholic life: believing, hoping, and loving (faith, hope, and love) (OCIA 42, 43).

The third bullet will be elaborated in upcoming articles. The second bullet will be addressed in the paragraphs on apologetics below. As to the first, the giving of the Gospel, this begs the question: *What is the Gospel?*

In a nutshell, the Gospel is the good news about God: his wonderful works, his love for humanity, and his plan for us. The Gospel is the path made clear—illuminating the two ways, one of life, one of death.<sup>4</sup> God is our Creator, and in him all things have their existence. God gives light to everyone who comes into this world, revealing himself through his works, so that all may learn to give thanks. Breaking down the Gospel into catechetical essentials could be done in the following manner during this period:

- **Trinitarian:** He who was sent by the Father and anointed by the Spirit is Lord, Messiah, and Savior, Son of God, and Son of Mary. The Father has sent his faithful begotten one, Jesus Christ, to announce to us his inner life, the mysteries of heaven. This is eternal life: to know the one true God and Jesus Christ, whom he has sent; the Trinity (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) is our destiny and model of perfect love (see Jn 6:29; GDC 99–100).
- **Christ-Centered:** Through the saving action of his Passion, death, Resurrection, and Ascension into heaven (the Paschal

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<sup>3</sup> See *The Order of Christian Initiation of Adults* (International Commission on English in the Liturgy, 2022), cited as OCIA in text.

<sup>4</sup> See *Didache* 1:1; CCC 1696; Aidan Kavanagh, *The Shape of Baptism: The Rite of Christian Initiation* (Liturgical Press, 1978), 36.

- Mystery), Jesus has become the way for us to take advantage of the Father's plan for our salvation (see Jn 14:6; GDC 98).
- **Ecclesial:** While on earth, Jesus went about doing good and preaching the kingdom of God, which he perpetuated in a visible Church (see Eph 3:10; CCC 760).
  - **Personal:** The Holy Spirit has made it possible for us to turn from the slavery of sin and to access the full power and merits won for us by Jesus Christ, which are dispensed in the Church through the sanctifying action of the sacramental life, enabling us to make the mind of Christ our own and to love God and neighbor in holiness (see 1 Cor 2:16; GDC 43, 117).
  - **Forward-Looking:** Jesus ascended to the Father to prepare a place for his people, who have been freed from sin and taken into the family of God (see Jn 14:1–7). We are a people founded in hope (see GDC 16).
  - **Heaven-Focused:** The Father's plan for our salvation is for us to "become partakers of the divine nature" (see 2 Pt 1:3–4; GDC 36). Jesus' family will endure the judgment that is to come and will enjoy his steadfast love that endures forever (see Ps 89:2) in the heavenly banquet.
  - **Experienced in This Community:** This parish family warmly invites you to come and see our life, to enter into full communion with Christ, and to participate in the Father's plan with us (see 1 Jn 1:1–4; GDC 102, 256).

The catechist in the precatechumenate is continually linking everything he or she teaches to the great story of the wonderful works of God and his plan revealed for us. Through reason, humanity can know *that* God exists; however, only from Revelation can humanity know *who* God is. Necessary to teaching during this period is helping inquirers understand how to navigate the Bible, as well as soaking each session in Scripture in order to guide and apply divine Revelation to daily life.

It is worth noting at this early stage that the use of citations from the Old and New Testaments in teaching OCIA sessions should evidence the radical change wrought by the Incarnation. Prayer, for example, has a different meaning in the Old Testament in that it is a human activity; in the New Testament, it is the activity of redeemed and elevated humanity and a participation in the prayer

of Jesus Christ. God is involved with his people in a new way in Christ Jesus, and his people are involved with him, here and now, immediately. The Church, then, is our encounter with Jesus, the Risen One, and the Risen One's encounter with those being transformed by his Spirit. The Church is not just the means that help us to encounter Jesus—*she is the encounter*.

## **Apologetics in the Precatechumenate Period: Building Trust**

In some quarters of Catholic society, especially some places on the internet, “apologetics” has become a word synonymous with sparring matches, biblical swordplay, or even doctrinal brawls. In the combat over who is “right,” charity is easily a casualty. It cannot be so when doing apologetics in the OCIA process. Apologetics is about removing barriers to allow for a full embrace. OCIA apologetics is a form of welcome, not challenge, in the precatechumenate. It is an invitation to hope—the theological virtue that stems from faith and enables love to be directed toward heaven, no matter the cost.

This is why the classic verse used in apologetics, “Always be prepared to make a defense to any one who calls you to account for the hope that is in you” (1 Pt 3:15), appears in a passage about perseverance in suffering and the perfecting of virtue. In other words, apologetics is not an end in itself, to prove one is “right,” nor is it primarily to defend whatever doctrine is in question; the doctrine is not an end in itself either. Instead, the purpose of apologetics in an OCIA setting is to foster deeper desire for God as Truth and to settle intellectual doubts that impede wholehearted pursuit of *virtue*. Thus, apologetics is one element of delivering the Gospel call to holiness.

Essential to apologetics is teaching doctrine as an organic reality, always placing answers to questions in the paradigm of love given and love returned (see Jn 15:9–12; 1 Jn 4:7–12). The organic nature of doctrine in OCIA apologetics seeks to answer the details while *always* pointing back to the whole. This helps participants begin to see the faith as a totality rather than a collection of doctrines—a pattern, not a pile. A catechist can deal with tough questions if the inquirers are led to see that the Church is about

expressing God's overwhelmingly generous love. This gives them a paradigm, a lens through which they might see and process the world, as well as individual answers that might otherwise threaten to atomize the faith into an uncounted number of accepted or rejected separate propositions.

Catechists and team members should encourage inquirers to ask questions in order to remove "stumbling blocks" (Rom 14:13) to seeing this vision of the faith. People who are not Catholic will naturally have questions about the faith. In justice, great care must be taken that the most troubling or difficult questions get answered for each inquirer, so that there will be no surprises after the commitment is made in the first rites. Initially, convincing inquirers that a catechist truly desires to know their questions may not be easy. Some people are too shy to ask questions verbally in the company of relative strangers. Encouraging those in the group who are willing to do so may help others venture to speak. Other means should be provided as well, such as giving a list of questions and letting people pick the ones that interest them the most, providing blank paper for submitting questions in written form, and answering important questions *not* asked that the catechist knows should have been asked. Regarding techniques for answering questions, the following suggestions may be helpful:

- Always restate each question so that all present hear exactly what is being answered and so that the questioner knows that he or she was heard correctly.
- Explain Catholic beliefs concisely and clearly, without feeling the need to give a whole "teaching."
- Answer accurately. If you're not sure, admit it and then look it up.
- Help inquirers recognize that some "hotly debated" issues cannot be answered simply or in "sound-bite" form.
- Rely on Scripture, Tradition, liturgy, and reason.
- Answer immediately, or give good reason for necessary delay (inquirers may not be there "later").
- Answer cheerfully, tirelessly, patiently, and, if necessary, answer the same questions repeatedly.
- Answer respectfully and not defensively.
- Answer practically with real-life application in mind.

- Ask for further questions—ask if the question was answered adequately for them.

As a final point, it is important to overcome an overly apologetic approach to doctrine. The *aesthetic* aspect of doctrine in catechesis should become part of a mature apologetics perspective. This means considering whether answers

adequately express not simply the “rightness” of a doctrine but also its *beauty*. If apologetics in the precatechumenate is one element in delivering the Gospel call to virtue, then the catechist aims to communicate a vision that is profoundly desirable—God’s love

and his glory given to us. Reflecting on this is one of the keys to helping inquirers see doctrines as expressive of a way of *life*, not just a way of *thinking*.

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## **Catechesis in the Catechumenate Period: Revelation and the Response of Faith**

This is the longest period of the Christian initiation process. It is also the most densely catechetical. The principal guideline for this period is found in 75.1 of the OCIA ritual book:

A suitable catechesis is provided by priests or deacons, or by catechists and others of the faithful, planned to be gradual and complete in its coverage, accommodated to the liturgical year, and solidly supported by celebrations of the word. This catechesis leads the catechumens not only to an appropriate acquaintance with dogmas and precepts but also to a profound sense of the mystery of salvation in which they desire to participate.

The catechetical component of this period is a complete delivery of the deposit of faith. Complete does not mean *exhaustive*. For example, it would be impossible to explain everything about the Blessed Virgin Mary—every particular development in doctrine drawn from statements made by popes or councils or every theological reflection on her from the writings of saints and theologians. Nor could a catechist do this with any other doctrine of the Church.

What can be done is to explain the *keys* to the deposit of faith as they are found in Scripture and Tradition. These keys help participants to unlock these mysteries so that they can return to them time and time again for further study and deeper prayer. A good guide for these keys is the *Credo of the People of God*, a modern-day creed promulgated by Pope St. Paul VI in 1965.<sup>5</sup> It is an official summary statement of the crucial truths that must be taught. The means to accomplish delivering these keys through a systematic and organic unfolding of the deposit of faith is the subject of upcoming articles. This work is certainly begun in the precatechumenate period, but a certain crucial emphasis exists in the catechumenate period to ensure that “a thoroughly comprehensive catechesis on the truths of Catholic doctrine and moral life” is given to participants.<sup>6</sup>

## **Catechesis in Purification and Enlightenment: Preparing to Receive the Life of God**

In this period, the focus shifts toward spiritual preparation for the sacraments of initiation. The themes of repentance and holiness are constant throughout this period. Catechesis in the period of purification and enlightenment should be significantly informed by the rites that inaugurate and permeate these weeks of preparation. Interior reflection (on God’s love for his people, his faithful provision, his call to turn to him fully), should seek to lead participants to repentance, acts of penance, a desire to offer thanksgiving, and more fervent practice of fraternal charity. The

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<sup>5</sup> See John Paul II, *Catechesi Tradendae*, no. 28.

<sup>6</sup> OCIA, Appendix III; United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, National Statutes for the Catechumenate, norm 6.



elect and candidates should turn to an ever-deepening study of Christ the Savior, focusing on the climactic events of the Paschal Mystery.

This period should be permeated with a spirit of prayer and retreat. The method of teaching *to* and *from* the rites becomes indispensable here. The Easter sacraments are the high point of this journey, and so the Church sets aside the whole season of Lent for preparation. As well, there are three Scrutinies for the elect and one Penitential Rite for the candidates, the Presentation Rites, and the Preparation Rites for Holy Saturday. All of these liturgical rites, found in the OCIA ritual book, should be studied closely for the sake of those coming into the Church. Based on a study of the guidelines and rites of this period, the following themes emerge which can serve as aids when preparing the sessions for this period:

- **The Mystery of Sin:**
  - The power of sin (OCIA 141, 143)
  - Acknowledgement of sin and failing (OCIA 153)
  - Forgiveness of sin and freedom from the effects of sin (OCIA 144, 154, 469)
- **The Power of Darkness:**
  - Satan and his minions (OCIA 141)
  - Freedom from the effects of the devil (OCIA 144)
  - Protection against temptation (OCIA 141)
- **Purification of Heart and Mind:**
  - A search of the conscience (OCIA 139)
  - Renunciation of self and penance (OCIA 139, 469)
  - Conversion and change of heart (OCIA 153, 469)
- **The Healing Effect of Mercy:**
  - Revelation and the healing of weakness (OCIA 469)
  - Freedom from falsehoods concerning God (OCIA 470)
  - Christ, the Lord of Mercy, in baptism and penance (OCIA 167, 299)
- **The Tremendous Sacrament of Baptism:**
  - Reflection on their baptism (or their coming Baptism) (OCIA 452, 556)
  - Ransomed by Christ, being baptized into his death and Resurrection (OCIA 168, 174)
  - Members of his Body, brothers and sisters in God's family (OCIA 134, 452, 465)

- **A Deeper Knowledge of Christ the Savior:**
  - Recognition of Christ's presence in daily life (OCIA 470)
  - Obedience to him (OCIA 131, 556)
  - Being conformed to Christ's suffering (OCIA 456)
- **Prayer:**
  - Spiritual recollection (OCIA 138)
  - Interior reflection (OCIA 139)
  - The help of the Holy Spirit (OCIA 153)

In this period of extended retreat, clergy, catechists, and other team members should help participants recognize Satan's deeds of deception and discouragement, which tempt them to abandon what they had started. Catechesis on prayer and spirituality aims to stir up more fervent faith and dispel darkness, reminding them of their newfound convictions and to what they committed before the bishop at the Rites of Election and Calling to Continuing Conversion. Most importantly, participants may need intense prayer for painful situations, or to work harder to end sinful habits and lingering doubts. Knowing the difficulties of this period, the Church provides powerful rites to sustain and strengthen participants' resolve to hold fast to Christ and his Church.

### **Catechesis in the Mystagogy (Post-Baptismal) Period: Deepening of the Graces Received**

The time following reception of the Sacraments of Initiation, ordinarily the seven weeks from Easter to Pentecost, is the period of Mystagogy. It must be spent aiding the deepening of participants' appreciation for the sacramental life. The intimate relationship they have longed to share with Christ and his Body in the parish community is realized in the Eucharist, the true source of communion and the authentic sign of unity. Now all have access to the full means for sanctification. Even so, care must be taken during their first few years as Catholics, especially in the Neophyte Year, to help them to grow and mature in the Christian life and to develop a genuine Catholic worldview.

What is meant by a Catholic worldview? It is the way that a Catholic thinks about and perceives the authentic realities

and transcendent truths—the absolute truths—that guide and direct life in Christ. Becoming Catholic is not simply joining a club; it is a total change of attitude, perception, and intent in life. Individuals have always had a worldview, whether or not they consciously thought about it. It was and continues to be formed by the culture in which they live and the events of their lives. Now, as Catholics, their worldview is radically changing thanks to the catechumenal process, prayer, their own acts of charity, and especially the abundant graces they are now receiving in the sacraments. As their minds and hearts continue to be fed on Scripture and the truths of the faith, transformed by the graces received in the sacraments, the fullness of Catholic truth gradually permeates all areas of their thinking. They may find themselves more sensitive to issues concerning life, human dignity, social justice, the value of suffering, the importance of family and vocation, the dignity of labor, and stewardship of the natural world. The list can go on to touch every aspect of human life and society.

This process takes time. It usually takes three to five years for neophytes to consistently think and feel like Catholics. Issues may come up—not necessarily entirely new but presenting themselves in a new light—or issues may arise that they had never dealt with before, and suddenly they surprise themselves by looking at them in a new way because of their Catholic formation. Catechesis seeks to support this process of change during the period of Mystagogy and the rest of the Neophyte Year, aiding the transition from the firm, personal conviction that brought them into the Church to a more fully mature Catholic worldview, seeing the world and its concerns as Christ and his Church see them. That will keep them enduringly Catholic in thought and actions.

During this period, the deepest meaning of discipleship must be examined, including the responsibilities to witness and to bring the light of the Gospel to every corner of the world. The Church has designed the Year A Lectionary readings for the Sundays and the Solemnity of the Ascension to form the basis for the teaching during this period (see OCIA 247). The following chart summarizes some of the Mystagogical themes present in the readings for Year A:

Day	Themes	Scripture Readings
Second Sunday of Easter	Sacrament of Penance; Apostolicity	Acts 2:42–47; Ps 118; 1 Pt 1:3–9; Jn 20:19–31
Third Sunday of Easter	Emmaus Event; Paradigm for the Mass	Acts 2:14, 22–33; Ps 16; 1 Pt 1:17–21; Lk 24:13–35
Fourth Sunday of Easter	The Church as the Sheepfold; Relationship with Jesus	Acts 2:14a, 36–41; Ps 23; 1 Pt 2:20b–25; Jn 10:1–10
Fifth Sunday of Easter	Heaven; Relationship with the Father through Jesus	Acts 6:1–7; Ps 33; 1 Pt 2:4–9; Jn 14:1–12
Sixth Sunday of Easter	Relationship with the Spirit through Jesus; “do whatever he tells you”	Acts 8:5–8, 14–17; Ps 66; 1 Pt 3:15–18; Jn 14:15–20
Ascension	The Great Commission; Evangelization/Witness; Necessity of Baptism	Acts 1:1–11; Ps 47; Eph 1:17–23; Mt 28:16–20
Seventh Sunday of Easter	Prayer for Unity and Glorification of the Church; Apostolicity	Acts 1:12–14; Ps 27; 1 Pt 4:13–16; Jn 17:1–11a

It is assumed that many of the truths discussed in this period will have been presented earlier in the OCIA process. The catechesis here thus seeks to deepen what has been offered in prior months. The work of this period is to more profoundly challenge and encourage the neophytes to become true disciples of Jesus. Discipleship means to know, think, and act like Christ. Yet this is more than mere imitation or simply trying “to be like” Jesus. The reality is that his disciples are truly transformed by Christ working in and through us by the gift of the Spirit.

Jesus gathered his first disciples around him in order to reveal the mysteries of his kingdom: “To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven. . . . Blessed are your eyes,

for they see, and your ears, for they hear” (Mt 13:11, 16). Christ’s revelation of the secrets to his disciples has been preserved in the Sacred Scriptures and Sacred Tradition of the Catholic Church. In order to think like Christ, the neophytes must seek to become “impregnated” with the teachings of Christ as transmitted by his Church.<sup>7</sup> St. Paul commends all Christians not to “be conformed to this world but transformed by the renewal of your mind” by the study of God’s Word (Rom 12:2).

And yet, Christ’s teachings must be not only intellectual knowledge but also apply personally. The neophyte should be encouraged to absorb this body of truth and to live more deeply the Christian life. It is in seeking to know God in faith and assenting to him that the faithful come to understand his teaching more fully, since the greatest

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way to show love for God is through obedience to his will (see Mt 7:21; 1 Jn 5:2–3). He rewards this embrace of his will with a greater understanding of his mysteries. The neophytes are thus also called to live the moral life with a serious pursuit of sanctity. It is the grace that comes from a sacramental, liturgical life that allows the neophytes (and all the faithful) to live a life of charity and to pursue holiness. It is a time to learn what it means to be glorified and what it means to be holy. Discipleship also means recognizing that alone we can do nothing at all, but God can do everything through us, for “in him, we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28).

During the first year as a Catholic, care must be taken to be sure that each neophyte is securely established in the life of the parish. The difficulties of this year can be very great. These

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<sup>7</sup> John Paul II, *Catechesi Trandendae*, 20.

fledgling Catholics cannot be neglected or forgotten once weekly organized instruction and spiritual direction is completed but instead must be helped to increase in faith, hope, and charity as they grow in the moral life and the liturgical life. They must have support and strengthening. Some means for facilitating this are:

- A library or collection of materials to continue a study of the faith
- A retreat focusing on faith, hope, and love
- A Bible study with new friends in the parish
- Specific invitations to parish missions, presentations by visiting speakers, and other adult education events
- A monthly neophyte newsletter
- Monthly gatherings with the pastor or members of the pastoral team just to chat or share a meal

In all stages of OCIA catechesis, every benefit must be provided for answering questions, identifying misconceptions, and imparting encouragement and hope.

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