

What the Church Has Been Telling Us About Adolescent Catechesis

Maura Thompson Hagarty, Ph.D.

The *National Directory for Catechesis* (NDC) is the latest in a series of church documents that have offered guidance on adolescent catechesis in the years since Vatican II (1962-1965). This article briefly surveys several of these documents, highlighting key ideas and developments and then posing questions relevant to the future of adolescent catechesis that have been prompted by my reading of the National Directory in light of them. These documents include catechetical directories, papal writings and youth ministry documents.

Early Catechetical Directories

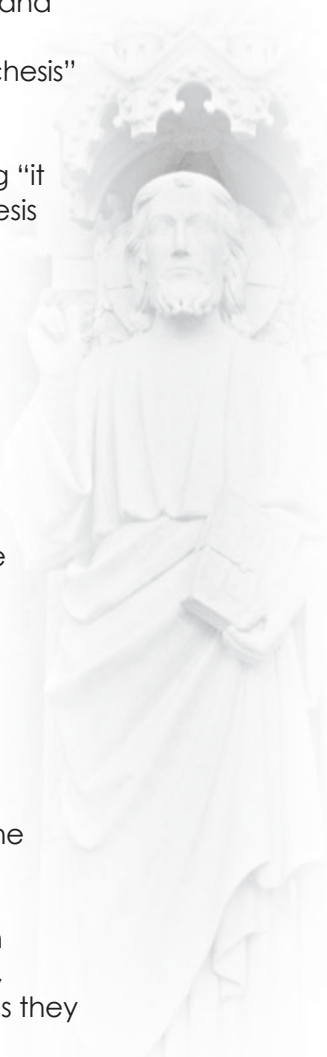
Vatican II affirmed the developments of the modern catechetical movement¹ when it called for a new genre among official documents—the catechetical directory—rather than a universal catechism for children. In 1971 the *General² Catechetical Directory* (GCD) was completed. It attempted to set a direction for catechesis at a time of tension and conflict. It also encouraged the development of other directories for specific nations or regions of the world. The bishops of the United States responded with publication of the *National Catechetical Directory* (NCD) in 1979. In subsequent years, both were revised. The *General Directory for Catechesis* (GDC) was published in 1997 and the new U.S. directory, the *National Directory for Catechesis*, in 2005. These directories are key sources of guidance for adolescent catechesis, not simply because they include sections specifically focused on this phase of life, but primarily because the overall vision of pastoral ministry, catechesis and Christian living that they set forth applies to people of all ages.

Both the 1971 *General Catechetical Directory* and the 1979 *National Catechetical Directory* identify catechesis as one form of the church's

ministry of the word³ and quote Vatican II's *Christus Dominus* (CD), n.14, to describe it. Catechesis "is intended to make [the people's] faith become living, conscious, and active through the light of instruction."⁴ Both, however, attempt to go beyond the implication that instruction is the primary means of catechesis. They emphasize the interrelation of catechesis with evangelization, understood as the initial proclamation of the word, and other ministries. The *General Catechetical Directory* also suggests that there are broad and narrow views of catechesis by distinguishing between "catechesis" and "catechesis proper."

The *National Catechetical Directory* is more direct, stating "it does not do justice to catechesis to think of it as instruction alone" (35). The U.S. Directory broadens catechesis beyond instruction also by identifying four tasks of catechesis: "to proclaim Christ's message, to participate in efforts to develop community, to lead people to worship and prayer and to motivate them to serve others."⁵

Both the General Directory and the National Directory call for adapting catechesis to various age levels including adolescence, the stage of life that spans the years roughly from the onset of puberty to the beginning of adulthood. Each directory draws on the social sciences to describe common characteristics of adolescents, identifies some of the problems they





General Session of the 2005 National Catholic Youth Conference – Georgia Dome, Atlanta
© National Federation for Catholic Youth Ministry, 2005.

face, and suggests some implications for catechesis.

The *General Catechetical Directory* states that “the principal task of catechesis” for this group is to help them develop a “genuinely Christian understanding of life. It must shed the light of the Christian message on the realities which have greater impact on the adolescent, such as the meaning of bodily existence, love and the family, the standards to be followed in life, work and leisure, justice and peace and so on” (84). Adolescent catechesis is effective when it leads young people toward assuming responsibility for living the Christian faith. In order to achieve this, catechesis should encourage “personal experience of the faith” and “well-ordered reflection on religious matters” (89).

The *National Catechetical Directory* guidelines for catechesis with children and youth emphasize that its “most important task...is to provide, through the witness of adults, an environment in which young people can grow in faith” (181). The National Directory notes that adolescents develop the ability to reason deductively, making the use of systematic, formal methods of instruction more feasible. Despite this, deductive methods are more effective when preceded by induction—approaches that provide “experiences of lived faith, in which the message of salvation is applied to specific situations” (181). The *National Catechetical Directory* calls for further research and experimentation as well as professional competence in order to produce programs that

properly sequence and present the Christian message in a manner appropriate to each age and maturity level.

U.S. Youth Ministry Documents

The period during which the *General Catechetical Directory* was being received and the *National Catechetical Directory* was being developed coincided with the emergence of a national consensus on the Church’s pastoral ministry with youth. In 1976, the Department of Education of the then U.S. Catholic Conference (USCC) published *A Vision of Youth Ministry* (VYM), which set forth goals and principles to guide a unified approach to ministry with young people. In its discussion of catechesis, the vision document *Christus Dominus* (14), but unlike the *General Catechetical Directory*, it omitted the reference to instruction. It distinguished between formal and informal catechesis and called for a diversity of approaches including retreats that enable “young people to experience Christian faith...in a way that is seldom possible within... the more academic framework” (VYM, p. 7). Like the *General Catechetical Directory* and the *National Catechetical Directory*, the vision statement identified catechesis as a ministry of the word closely related to evangelization.

A Vision of Youth Ministry stresses that the full effectiveness of the ministries of the word, catechesis and evangelization depends on situating them in the context of a multi-faceted ministry and tending to all facets. It refers to them as components and identifies seven: word, worship, creating community, guidance and healing, justice and service, ennoblement, and advocacy. The implication for adolescent catechesis is clear: To succeed in this one area of ministry, the church must be effective in all the others.

Ten years later, in 1986, a document developed by the National Federation for Catholic Youth Ministry (NFCYM), *The Challenge of Adolescent Catechesis: Maturing in Faith*, focused more extensively on the catechetical aspect of the word component of youth ministry. Challenge followed the General Directory and the National Directory in identifying catechesis as a ministry of the word and Pope John Paul II’s 1979 apostolic exhortation, *Catechesi Tradendae* in defining catechesis as a moment or stage in the process

Both the General Directory and the National Directory call for adapting catechesis to various age levels including adolescence, the stage of life that spans the years roughly from the onset of puberty to the beginning of adulthood. Each directory draws on the social sciences to describe common characteristics of adolescents, identifies some of the problems they face, and suggests some implications for catechesis.

of evangelization.⁶ Here “evangelization” is a broad concept that parallels the full process of conversion rather than the initial proclamation of the word. This document, however, doesn’t fully explore the implications of situating catechesis in the context of evangelization.⁷ It clearly recognizes that catechesis is “a broad reality” but intentionally sets out to provide guidance only on one dimension of catechesis—the “systematic and formal” aspect “that can be planned” (5).

Over a decade later, in 1997, the U.S. bishops published *Renewing the Vision: A Framework for Catholic Youth Ministry*, which, like the 1976 vision statement, situated catechesis within a broad view of comprehensive youth ministry and a framework of components. Catechesis and evangelization are identified as distinct components—two of eight—that must be integrated in a unified approach if the Church’s ministry with young people is to be effective. Important to note in any conversation about adolescent catechesis is that the vision of catechesis set forth in the *General Directory for Catechesis* published the same year is broader than the *Renewing the Vision* description of catechesis. This does not imply conflict. Rather, catechesis as presented in the *General Directory for Catechesis* overlaps with several of the components of *Renewing the Vision* in addition to the one named “catechesis,” including community, evangelization, leadership development and advocacy.

Revised Directories for Catechesis

The 1997 *General Directory for Catechesis* sought to rearticulate the nature and purpose of catechesis in light of texts published since the 1971 directory including *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, *Catechesi Tradendae* and the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. Like the *General Catechetical Directory*, it set forth a view of catechesis that goes beyond instruction. The *General Directory for Catechesis* quotes Vatican II’s *Christus Dominus* (14), but omits the reference to instruction as the means of catechesis that the *General Catechetical Directory* and the *National Catechetical Directory* retained. In a significant development, the general directory draws on the 1983 *Code of Canon Law* to identify two principle means of catechesis: “transmission of the Gospel message and experience of the Christian life.”⁸ The *General Directory* says it is a problem that “catechists do not yet have a full understanding” of catechesis as “an initiation and apprenticeship in the entire Christian life” (30). It presents both evangelization and catechesis as bipolar ministries of word and witness. This emphasis on the witness of the community is not a radical change, however. The earlier directories and documents recognize the importance of the community and its way of life. What is new with the *General Directory* is greater emphasis on the role of the community and the idea that this witness is constitutive of catechesis rather than simply part of the context for effective catechesis.

The 1997 *General Directory* follows *Evangelii Nuntiandi* and *Catechesi Tradendae* in identifying catechesis as a moment in the whole process of evangelization and draws extensively from Vatican II’s *Ad Gentes* in its presentation.⁹ “Evangelization” is the whole dynamic and cyclical process “for establishing and building up the church” (GDC 47). The directory delineates six elements in this process:

1. Transforming people and cultures through love
2. Bearing witness to the new way of life that characterizes Christians
3. Proclaiming the Gospel and calling people to conversion
4. Incorporating people into the community

by means of catechesis and the sacraments

5. Carrying out continuous pastoral activity aimed at strengthening communion by means of ongoing education in the faith, the sacraments, and the practice of charity
6. Inspiring people to continue the mission of the church and sending them to proclaim the gospel through words and actions (see GDC 48).

The same process can be viewed from the perspective of an adolescent experiencing conversion. The young person (1) comes to know love, (2) is exposed to a new way of life through relationships with Christians including peers and adults, (3) hears the Gospel and is inspired to explore its implications for his or her own life, (4) is initiated through the sacraments and catechesis, (5) participates in the life of the community including liturgy (6) and commits to continuing the Church's mission. The perpetuation of the church depends on young people and adults progressing through these various phases and continuing the cycle.

To say that catechesis is a moment in the process of evangelization is to emphasize that it plays a role in keeping the dynamic cycle of evangelization going. It is important to recognize that catechesis is not equated with the whole of any one of the six phases articulated in the *General Directory for Catechesis*. Its largest role is in phases four (as initiatory catechesis) and five (as ongoing catechesis); however, catechesis frequently must be concerned with the earliest phases in the process of evangelization.¹⁰

The 1997 General Directory also is noteworthy for incorporating the process of inculturation into its vision of catechesis. Pope John Paul II had used the term inculturation in the late 1970s, referring to it as a neologism. In *Catechesi Tradendae* he explains that catechesis must "bring the power of the Gospel into the very heart of culture and cultures" and "seek to know these cultures...learn their most significant expressions...[and] respect their particular values and riches." In this way, catechesis will offer cultures "knowledge of the hidden mystery and help them to bring forth from their own

living tradition original expressions of Christian life, celebration and thought" (53). Through the process of inculturation, catechesis will also help to enrich and purify the inhuman elements in cultures. Noteworthy is the fact that the pope mentions "modern youth" as an example of a culture or milieu (53). He explains that "catechesis has a pressing obligation to speak a language suited to today's children and young people" as well as other categories of people (59). At the same time, the pope stresses that catechesis must not distort the message of the Gospel and the content of doctrine.

The *General Directory for Catechesis* calls inculturation one of the greatest challenges and delineates numerous tasks associated with it.¹¹ The starting point for catechesis that inculturates is an analysis of the situation. The necessary analysis examines the state of catechesis, socio-cultural factors and the religious situations of the people (279). This becomes the basis for creating a program of action.

The General Directory also presents a new framework of tasks to help guide catechesis: 1) promote knowledge of the faith; 2) liturgical education; 3) moral formation; 4) teaching to pray; 5) education for community life; and (6) missionary initiation (86). The tasks are "interdependent and develop together" (87). The first four reflect the pillar structure of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, a primary reference for catechesis.¹² It stresses that the doctrinal synthesis presented in the catechism "does not, however, impose a predetermined configuration" to be followed in presenting catechetical content in the practice of ministry or in drawing up local catechisms (122). "The selection of a particular order for presenting the message is conditioned by circumstances, and by the faith level of those to be catechized" (118).

The General Directory asserts that "youth catechesis must be profoundly revised and revitalized" (181) and "proposed in new ways" (185). It also affirms the U.S. vision of youth ministry in saying that "the most successful catechesis...is given in the context of the wider pastoral care of young people, especially when it addresses the problems affecting their lives" (184). Consequently, adolescent catechesis should include "analysis of situations, attention

to human sciences and education, [and] the cooperation of the laity and of young people themselves" (184). The General Directory also identifies a difficulty that must be addressed and resolved—the “question of ‘language’ (mentality, sensibility, tastes, style, vocabulary) between young people and the Church” (185). It is necessary to adapt catechesis “in order to translate” Jesus’ message without betrayal “into the terms” of young people (185). This work is presented by the General Directory as work yet to be accomplished, presumably by local churches.

The U.S. bishops’ *National Directory for Catechesis*¹³ is the longest of the directories and is characterized by the incorporation of material from a large number of sources including the earlier directories, numerous U.S. bishops’ documents in addition to *Renewing the Vision*, papal encyclicals, Vatican II documents, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* and the work of the committee that oversees the use of the catechism in this country.

In the course of presenting and affirming the vision of catechesis as set forth by these many sources, the *National Directory for Catechesis* incorporated a number of tensions that reflect the situation of catechesis in the United States today. These tensions point to some questions the Church must grapple with as it faces the challenge of carrying out effective adolescent catechesis in the future.

1. The National Directory incorporates several frameworks from earlier documents that attempt to guide catechesis. These include the four pillars (from the catechism), the six tasks of catechesis (from the General Directory), the two means of catechesis (from the catechism and the General Directory), the six phases of evangelization (from *Ad Gentes* and the General Directory for Catechesis) and the eight components of youth ministry (from *Renewing the Vision*). Which are most useful for adolescent catechesis? Is it possible to integrate the most important aspects of each into a new framework that functions as a compelling, unifying vision for adolescent catechesis and other ministries?¹⁴

2. The National Directory emphasizes the importance of fostering a common language of the faith¹⁵ as well as animating the process of inculturation¹⁶ and employing language suited to the recipients of catechesis¹⁷? How do we balance the value of common wording with the value of translating the message into terms young people understand? At what point do either uniformity of wording or new expressions and language begin to impede the church’s efforts to make disciples?

3. Like the *General Directory for Catechesis* and the *Code of Canon Law*, the *National Directory for Catechesis* identifies two means of catechesis—the transmission of the Gospel message and the experience of Christian living. Although in several places the National Directory affirms the importance of the latter means,¹⁸ the Directory as a whole gives instruction and the teaching of doctrine more attention. This is not unusual in either catechetical documents or in practice, but it raises questions. Do we tend to focus on the parts of catechesis that we can more easily define, plan, and program? Do we need to explore ways to invest more time and resources in the second means, given its widely recognized importance?

4. What is the proper role for the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* in adolescent catechesis? The General Directory and the National Directory identify it as a doctrinal point of reference. The national directory explains that catechetical materials must reflect the *Catechism’s* four pillars and clearly display its theological structure (293) but also that the

One central guiding principle that the Church has been telling us repeatedly since Vatican II is to pay attention to context. Adolescents always must be viewed in the context of their relationships including family members, the Christian community, and their cultural milieu.

Catechism does not impose a predetermined format (72). The *General Directory for Catechesis* makes the point more emphatically by quoting then Cardinal Ratzinger: “The best structure for catechesis must be one which is suitable to particular concrete circumstances and cannot be established for the entire church by a common catechism” (122). How do we strike the proper balance between attention to content and attention to circumstances when planning our approaches to adolescent catechesis? What are the best strategies for involving youth themselves in this discernment?

These questions do not have easy answers and the tensions underlying them are real. They affect the ability of local communities to harmoniously plan and implement effective strategies for handing on the faith to younger generations and perpetuating the Church and its mission in the world.

One central guiding principle that the Church has been telling us repeatedly since Vatican II is to pay attention to context. Adolescents always must be viewed in the context of their relationships including family members, the Christian community, and their cultural milieu. Meanwhile catechesis always must be viewed in the context of the Church’s broader pastoral ministry, whether that is named evangelization, youth ministry or something else.

The challenge of adolescent catechesis does not exist in isolation from the challenge of implementing effective catechesis for adults and younger children. Nor does the challenge of adolescent catechesis exist in isolation from the challenge of showering genuine love and concern upon adolescents and inspiring young and old alike to enthusiastically witness a Christian way of life, participate fully in liturgy and embrace the church’s mission as their own. In the right context, catechesis plays a critical role in enhancing the participation of adolescents in the life of the Church. There is no doubt that tending to context adds complexity to the challenge of adolescent catechesis.

Without this extra work, however, a community’s ministry of catechesis with adolescents may be more hindrance than help in the process of making young disciples.



Maura Thompson Hagarty is an experienced parish youth minister and director of religious education. She holds a masters degree in pastoral studies from Loyola University of Chicago and a Ph.D. in religious education from The Catholic University of America. She currently works as an editor for Saint Mary’s Press and resides in the Raleigh, North Carolina area with her family.

www.adolescentcatechesis.org

References

- 1 For an overview of this 20th century renewal movement see Berard L. Marthaler, “The Modern Catechetical Movement in Roman Catholicism: Issues and Personalities,” in *Sourcebook for Modern Catechetics*, ed. Michael Warren (Winona: Saint Mary’s Press), 275-289.
- 2 The term ‘general’ indicates that the document was written for the whole church throughout the world.
- 3 The other forms are identified as evangelization, liturgy, and theology.
- 4 GCD 17. Cf. CD 14 and NCD 32.
- 5 NCD 213.
- 6 See CAC 4, 5 and CT 20.
- 7 In 1993 the NFCYM explored the evangelization of adolescents in a document entitled, *The Challenge of Catholic Youth Evangelization: Called to be Witnesses and Storytellers*
- 8 GDC 87. Cf. CIC 773. For a discussion of the development of canon 773 and its meaning see Maura Thompson Hagarty, “The Code, Catechesis, and the Concept ‘Experience’: A Commentary on Canon 773” *The Jurist* 61 (2001) 239-256.
- 9 See AG 6, 11-18.
- 10 See GDC 52 and 185.
- 11 See GDC 109-110, 202-214.
- 12 See GDC 119-136, which situates catechisms in relation to catechesis.
- 13 For a summary of the NDC and what it says about adolescent catechesis see Daniel S. Mulhall, “Adolescent Catechesis and the NDC: It’s about Discipleship,” *Catechetical Leader* 16:5 (September 2005): 10-13.
- 14 RTV 59, n.8, points out that “there are a variety of schemas for identifying the ministries of the church” and roots its framework of components in Canons 528-529. This insight may be a helpful starting point for comparing the various frameworks set forth in the documents that guide adolescent catechesis.
- 15 See NDC 72, 86, 87, 293. Notice, for example, that NDC 72 adds this to the list of criteria for presenting the message delineated in GDC 97.
- 16 See NDC 63-67, 82-83,
- 17 See NDC 186, 65, 66, 83, 87, 130.
- 18 See NDC 118, 204, 199-200