

# Adolescent Catechesis in a Culturally Diverse Context

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**S**prinkled throughout the *National Directory for Catechesis* (NDC) are a series of short separate discussions of the cultural diversity of the U.S. Catholic population. This article attempts to organize the various discussions of the issues, tensions and hopes for the future of U.S. adolescent catechesis in a culturally diverse context.

## **Incarnation: Christ and Cultures**

Jesus Christ is Christianity. Catechesis, whether for adults or adolescents, rightly centers on Jesus. His name appears twice in the very first sentence of the introduction to the NDC. Jesus is the starting point for *catechesis*, a particular ministry of the word that educates believers for “a deeper knowledge and love of his person and message, and a firm commitment to follow him.”<sup>1</sup>

“And the Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us, and we saw his glory, the glory as of the Father’s only Son, full of grace and truth” (Jn 1:14). The Incarnation is the special revelation of God in Jesus Christ in a specific culture, space and time.<sup>2</sup> The Incarnation provides the theological foundation for exploring the close connection between Christ and diverse cultures.

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The church is committed to connecting Christ to cultures. Each Sunday, the U.S. Catholic Church prays in more than 80 languages and labors to help people to make sense of their lives and cultures in light of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.<sup>4</sup> It might be said that the Church *inculturates* the Gospel each Sunday. That is, it strives to help faith in Jesus take root in diverse cultures so that it grows like a plant in its native soil. “It is not a superficial adaptation designed to make the Gospel more pleasing to its hearers. It is, rather, a process that brings the transforming power of the Gospel to touch persons in their hearts and cultures at the deepest levels.”<sup>5</sup>

The NDC outlines a process for inculturating the Gospel that involves listening to the people’s culture for an echo of the word of God, and then discerning the presence of (or openness to) authentic Gospel values. “This discernment process is governed by two basic principles: ‘compatibility with the Gospel and communion with the universal church.’”<sup>6</sup>

## **Profile of Catholic Population in the U. S.**

The NDC suggests that “the increasing diversity present in most local churches has provided rich





Participants at the 2006 National Conference on Catholic Youth Ministry – Riviera Convention Center, Las Vegas © National Federation for Catholic Youth Ministry, 2006.

opportunities. The multiple ethnic, racial and cultural communities make possible a spirit that renews and sustains the life of the church.”<sup>7</sup> Cultural diversity is intertwined with the spiritual renewal of the U.S. Catholic Church, and adolescent catechesis is already engaged in this renewal movement. Across the United States, adolescent catechetical programs are educating in faith youth who represent Catholic churches from nearly every nation on earth.

Elaborating on this reality, the NDC (2005) reported “the Catholic population in the United States is generally comparable, in racial and ethnic distribution, to the population of the United States as a whole, except with a smaller proportion of African Americans and a larger proportion of Hispanic/Latinos.”<sup>8</sup> Consequently, the U.S. Catholic Church with its estimated 69 million members is more ethnically diverse than any other similarly sized Catholic population in the world.<sup>9</sup>

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Cultural diversity is a hallmark of the U.S. Catholic Church, and this diversity has urgent implications for adolescent catechesis.

Chief among them is the need to assess the impact of cultural diversity on adolescents’ experience of learning. To access their experience, one practical suggestion is to have adolescents complete a “Critical Incident Questionnaire” in which they are asked to name their most rewarding or exciting moment (learning high), their most distressing or frustrating moment (learning low), and the most important insights that they realized about themselves. Adolescents also may be asked for specific examples of observable catechist characteristics or behaviors that either were helpful to their learning or hindered it.<sup>10</sup> An alternative to the “Critical Incident Questionnaire” is to ask one or two adolescents to informally interview their peers. Once catechists or teachers have collected the responses, the hard work of interpretation may begin.

Interpretation depends on a working knowledge of history, especially each cultural group’s history of education and its history of catechesis. History is an indispensable tool for catechists seeking to understand an adolescent’s experience of learning. Given the increasing cultural diversity of the U.S. Catholic Church, it is difficult to overstate the need for everyone involved with adolescent catechesis to learn about their own histories and those of other cultural groups. Knowledge of history is essential to inculturating the Gospel, in part, because history still plays out in our day. “As author William Faulkner observed, ‘The past is never dead. It’s not even past.’”<sup>11</sup> For example, consider the history of education of many Native American tribes, which is epitomized in the traumatic boarding school experience that lasted from about 1879 to 1968. Boarding school curricula of that era systematically sought to extinguish tribal languages, cultures, family ties and tribal affiliations, and it effectively replaced them with their counterparts in the dominant culture. Such practices continue to undermine tribal culture and have led to terrible suffering. This lesson of the importance of cultural differences is an essential lesson for those involved in adolescent catechesis.

With increased diversity comes the need to adapt programs and teaching methods to meet adolescents where they are. For example, a

catechetical program might offer a unit in which small groups of adolescents study and take pride in their particular culture's church history and its distinct popular religious practices (e.g., Polish, Cuban, Black, Mexican, Irish, Lakota Sioux, Puerto Rican, Vietnamese, etc.). Subsequent large-group discussions might link these local histories to the history of the universal church. For this proposed unit on church history, a learning outcome might read: to recognize that each culture in the church can learn from every other culture.<sup>12</sup> Increasing diversity also suggests that catechists need to adapt and expand their repertoire of teaching methods in ways that make sense for adolescents in their diocese, school or parish.<sup>13</sup>

In Acts of the Apostles 2:1-13, the Holy Spirit at Pentecost appeared as tongues of fire that came to rest on each of the apostles and they went out to preach courageously in languages new to them, but that were intelligible to people from all parts of the known world. Begging the help of the Holy Spirit, catechetical leaders have the difficult task of recruiting and training future catechists for a culturally diverse adolescent population.<sup>14</sup> Some practical recruitment suggestions include using every language spoken by the adolescents to be catechized in hope of finding a team of catechists who are comfortable in a range of languages and cultures. Try to consult face-to-face with as many adults and teens as possible in each racial and ethnic group represented among the adolescent population.

### **Christian Practices**

One innovative model that holds great promise for adolescent catechesis in a culturally diverse context is the Christian practices movement funded by Lilly Endowment, Inc., a private, Indiana-based, family foundation that promotes social structures that benefit the common good.<sup>15</sup> The foundation underwrites an array of projects aimed at enhancing the religious formation of youth within Christian communities throughout the United States. One project is dedicated to the recovery of a core set of Christian practices—hospitality, Sabbath-keeping, discernment, forgiveness, shaping communities and so on—as a contemporary synthesis of belief and action in concrete,

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down-to-earth ways. "Christian practices are things Christian people do together over time to address fundamental human needs in the light of and in response to God's grace to all creation through Christ Jesus."<sup>16</sup>

Christian practices are based on the conviction that Christians are formed by their beliefs about Jesus and by their actions that echo the actions of Christ: feeding the hungry, tending to the sick, caring for the poor and needy, praying with others. For the founders of the Christian practices movement, human needs are important because they are openings for God's grace, mercy and presence.<sup>17</sup> The list of Christian practices is growing as people reflect on their faith and its connections to daily life. For example in the anthology, *Way to Live: Christian Practices for Teens*, some 18 new Christian practices were identified by pairs of adult mentors and adolescents.<sup>18</sup>

Applied to adolescent catechesis in a culturally diverse context, Christian practices are noteworthy because they are broadly accessible, they emphasize community and they allow for local variety in their expression. Christian practices are a type of field experiment in hands-on Christianity.<sup>19</sup> Christian practices not only foster the sort of social, affective and moral bonds that adolescents need to become active adult Catholics, but also incarnate the Christian life and gospel in a particular cultural context, language, space and time. Christian practices are practices of commitment.<sup>20</sup> Christian practices are distinct from other renewal movements in catechesis because its founders claim that all of the Christian practices, when

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woven together, can form a healthy way of life that is faithful and has integrity.<sup>21</sup> Parish members are bound together not only by their common faith and beliefs, but also by their willingness to engage in Christian practices with those who might be different from themselves. As a sign of hope for the future of catechesis, Christian practices can promote a sense of belonging and relatedness regardless of racial and ethnic diversity.

There are many ways that these Christian practices can be made a part of culturally appropriate adolescent catechesis. For example, consider the possibility of punctuating a semester-long classroom-based catechetical program with an experience of the Christian practice of hospitality. For example, at Dolores Mission (a culturally diverse Latino/a and White (Anglo) parish in East Los Angeles, California) engaging adolescents in an experience of hospitality as a Christian practice might include participating in the parish celebration of *Las Posadas*, an Advent season, night-time candlelight pilgrimage that over a span of several nights stops at parishioners' homes in a ritual reenactment of the expectant Virgin Mary and Joseph searching in vain for a room at an inn in Bethlehem (Lk 2:1-7).<sup>22</sup> Given the short-term nature of the commitment, adults and older teens could more easily be found to supervise a small group of adolescents and to assist them in reflecting on their faith and on the significance of the Incarnation. For more ideas, consult the Christian practices for teens website at <http://www.waytolive.org/>.

## **Catechumenate as a Model for Adolescent Catechesis**

The catechumenate, the process by which new members are initiated into the faith community, is an appropriate model for describing effective adolescent catechesis in a culturally diverse context. In keeping with the spirit of the new evangelization that leads to effective adolescent catechesis, the catechumenate involves personal conversion to Jesus Christ and a growing desire to encounter him in Scripture, tradition, service and the sacraments of the church. The NDC recognizes the need to inculturate the catechumenate by employing "with proper discernment, the language, symbols and values of the catechumens and those being catechized."<sup>23</sup> It is also possible to consider the catechumenate as a way of life in the same way that the many Christian practices are a way of life. Both are processes by which one's beliefs and actions come into greater conformity with Jesus Christ and allow for greater spiritual intimacy in prayer. This is often facilitated when spiritual retreats are seen as an integral part of both the catechumenate and adolescent catechesis. Examples of successful adolescent retreat movements that feature peer faith formation are Teens Encounter Christ (TEC) and Kairos.<sup>24</sup> Such retreats can facilitate positive interactions among adolescents from diverse ethnic and racial groups, and can serve as a benchmark spiritual experience for teens.

When applying the catechumenal model to catechist in-service programs, consider a spiritual retreat format that encourages experiences of personal and communal prayer that facilitate deeper intimacy with Jesus. In designing such a retreat, care should be taken to incorporate Christian symbols that are laden with cultural meaning for the participants. Avoid indiscriminately appropriating or handling symbols from another's culture. For instance, only a Native American should handle an eagle feather and incense for a smudging rite. In similar fashion, only Mexican Americans should be allowed to carry the image of Our Lady of Guadalupe in a religious procession, or to take one of the leadership roles in the parish's celebration of the Feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe.

## Tensions around Language, Sanctuary and Credentials

In some parishes and dioceses, increasing cultural diversity has led to rising tensions around issues of language and culture. For example, Spanish-language and English-language groups compete for access to the main sanctuary at prime time on Sunday mornings: Being relegated to the gym or to the downstairs church is a badge of inferiority. Often enough, Hispanic culture and distinctive liturgical practices are kept in the shadows, but on big feasts such as Our Lady of Guadalupe (December 12) it seems as if the whole church would like to pray in Spanish. This suggests a certain ambivalence in the U.S. Catholic Church regarding cultural distinctiveness and language.<sup>25</sup> While Hispanic ministry is a priority for the church, many U.S. catechists, teachers and pastors still can speak only English and are mono-cultural.

Another source of tension in the church is the issue of credentials for catechists. At the diocesan level and in larger parishes, a master's degree in theology or its equivalent is a minimum requirement for employment. Given that about 1-in-4 Americans has a degree from a four-year college, most parishes will have some catechists who do not have a college degree. If certificates are required for all catechists, then what happens to Catholics who might be excluded due to the lack of educational background, a shortage of funds or the absence of a training program in their own language? Are the poor being excluded from serving as catechists?

## Conclusion

This article has examined the contemporary issues, tensions and hopes of the church for adolescent catechesis in a culturally diverse context, paying special attention to the history, experience and racial-ethnic frame of reference of minority Catholic populations. In the longing for greater faith, hope and love grounded in a close relationship with Jesus Christ, the church embarks with greater zeal for catechesis on the way of new evangelization. Let our prayers for the future of adolescent catechesis join with the Eucharistic prayer for reconciliation wherein the church asks Christ "to gather people of every race language and way of life to share in the one eternal banquet."



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[www.adolescentcatechesis.org](http://www.adolescentcatechesis.org)

## End Notes

- 1 United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *National Directory for Catechesis* [NDC], (Washington, DC: USCCB, 2005), 54.
- 2 NDC, 63.
- 3 *Documents of the Thirty-fourth General Congregation of the Society of Jesus*, (St. Louis, MO: The Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1995), page 49, #75, footnote no. 1.
- 4 Office of Religious Education for the Archdiocese of Los Angeles, "Philosophy," (last accessed on 9/4/2007) at <http://www.archdiocese.la/learning/ore/guidelines/philosophy.html>.
- 5 NDC, 75, 82.
- 6 NDC, 64.
- 7 NDC, 9.
- 8 NDC, 34.
- 9 NDC, 34; USCCB Department of Communications, *Catholic Information Project: The Catholic Church in America: Meeting Real Needs in Your Neighborhood*, (Washington, DC: USCCB, 2006), 3.
- 10 Stephen D. Brookfield, *The Skillful Teacher: On Technique, Trust, and Responsiveness in the Classroom*, (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1990), 32.
- 11 Joel Spring, *The Intersection of Cultures: Multicultural Education in the United States and the Global Economy*, 3rd edition (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc., 2006), 9.
- 12 Joseph Fitzpatrick, *Strangers and Aliens No Longer, Part One: The Hispanic Presence in the Church in the United States* (Washington, DC: NCCB/USCC Office of Research, 1992) which was cited in Esperanza Ginoris, "Hispanic Religious Education," in *Multicultural Religious Education*, (ed.) Barbara Wilkerson (Birmingham, AL: Religious Education Press, 1997), 235.
- 13 Brookfield, *The Skillful Teacher*, 202-203.

- 14 For a list of leadership characteristics that can be applied to the selection of future catechists, see 1 Timothy 3:1-13.
- 15 John Van Engen, "Introduction: Formative Religious Practices in Pre-modern European Life," in *Educating People of Faith: Exploring Jewish and Christian Communities*, (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004), 1.
- 16 Valparaiso Project on the Education and Formation of People in Faith, "What are Christian Practices?" in *Practicing Our Faith* Web site (Valparaiso, IN: The Valparaiso Project on the Education and Formation of People in Faith, 2006), 1. (Last accessed on 9/4/2007.) Available at: [http://www.practicingourfaith.org/prct\\_what\\_are\\_practices.html](http://www.practicingourfaith.org/prct_what_are_practices.html).
- 17 Craig Dykstra and Dorothy C. Bass, "A Theological Understanding of Christian Practices," in *Practicing Theology: Belief and Practices in Christian Life*, (eds.) Miroslav Volf and Dorothy C. Bass (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002), 22.
- 18 *Way to Live: Christian Practices for Teens*, (eds.) Dorothy C. Bass and Don Richter (Nashville, TN: Upper Room Books, Inc., 2002).
- 19 NDC, 202.
- 20 Craig Dykstra, *Growing in the Life of Faith: Education and Christian Practices*, (Louisville, KY: Geneva Press, 1999), 48, n. 16.
- 21 Valparaiso Project on the Education and Formation of People in Faith, "What are Christian Practices?" in *Practicing Our Faith* Website, 1. (Last accessed on 9/4/2007.) Available at: [http://www.practicingourfaith.org/prct\\_what\\_are\\_practices.html](http://www.practicingourfaith.org/prct_what_are_practices.html).
- 22 Ana Maria Pineda, "Hospitality," in *Practicing Our Faith: A Way of Life for a Searching People*, (ed.) Dorothy C. Bass (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, Inc., 1997), 31.
- 23 NDC, 83.
- 24 Bishop Edward Clark, "What is New about the New Evangelization?" *Origins*, vol. 36, no. 1 (May 18, 2006), 7. See also NDC, 61.
- 25 Diane Ravitch, "On the History of Minority Group Education in the United States," *Teachers College Record*, vol. 78, no. 2 (1976), 227-228.