

ARE YOU VIEWING CATECHESIS AS THE POWERFUL INTERVENTION IT WAS MEANT TO BE?

BY GEORGIE NORMAND, M.A.



CATECHESIS AS INTERVENTION



After spending years in the literacy field and seeing the impact an intensive intervention can have on a child's trajectory, I believe viewing catechesis as a powerful intervention could reshape the way catechesis is "done" at the parish level. Like academic interventions, catechesis must be frequent, intensive, and explicit to provide a defense against the lingering effects of the Fall that continue after Baptism."

If we've done our job effectively, every Catholic child should begin adulthood as a lay theologian equipped to recognize and resist the errors of the day. They should thoroughly understand their need for holiness and their lifelong need for the Church.

When we consider that many of the earliest Church martyrs were young people, we're forced to ask ourselves, "What's missing today?" This is especially the case in the western Church. In February of 2015, twenty-one young Coptic believers chose death over denying their Christian faith.



To understand what type of faith formation led them to a beach on the Libyan shore where they preferred to be beheaded rather than deny Christ, I found their story in *The 21: A Journey into the Land of Coptic Martyrs* by Martin Moseback. I also learned that their strong faith even converted the one non-believer among them.

What I learned through that book and additional research was that their Christian faith was the warp and woof of their everyday lives. It was not a fun and superficial add-on in the form of drop-offs at the church right after soccer practice. They learned early that Christ was everything, not just a part of their life. Knowing and serving Him was their life purpose and they already understood that they were always being tested to see if they would follow Him, even unto death. When confronted with this life and death decision, they were able to see clearly where they were in this mission and knew what they were being called to do.

In their local churches and the domestic churches within their individual homes, they had been taught that the Faith is serious business. They had never been immersed in the lighthearted treatment of the Faith that we often see in the West where catechesis must be superficial and entertaining. Their own mothers were the first to give thanks to God for their sons' faithfulness.

In contrast, we have been unintentionally sending explicit and implicit signals that minimize the importance of catechesis and the role it should have in Christian upbringing. For example, let's just talk about the summer break. In the academic setting, taking an entire summer break from an intervention creates a dramatic reversal in progress. It sometimes takes several months for a student to recover that lost learning, and recovery only occurs when there is a thorough review of the previous material.

Vacation Bible School, though well intentioned, is not an adequate replacement for lost time in real catechesis. Those of us who have taught in the typical VBS program know that the content rarely registers on the "theology scale." Over 12 years of potential catechesis, the summer break results in a student losing 24-36 months or 2-3 entire years! Not to mention that the "break mentality" itself has a tendency to devalue the importance of daily and/or weekly catechesis in the mind of the child – as though it's something we need a "break" from, like social studies or science. The situation is far worse for those children attending non-Catholic schools. The CCD schedule is already lightweight at barely an hour a week during the school year, not counting bathroom breaks and other interruptions.



Many of these children disappear between the attendance requirements for First Penance/First Communion and Confirmation and how many of those families make Sunday Mass a priority over sports and other prioritized distractions?

This is why I feel so strongly about not using that precious teaching time to do crafts or “filler” activities. Let them take a craft home to complete IF it actually reinforces an important theological point covered in the lesson. Far better is a lesson-related image taken home and attached to the fridge as a daily reminder of the previous week’s lesson. Minutes are precious when it comes to souls. Fast-paced review games of 5-10 minutes, on the other hand, can reinforce actual learning without wasting precious minutes - and children love them. Cumulative review of previous material (in question and answer or game format) should begin and end each lesson because it improves retention.

Speaking of retention, props and visuals should be used in every lesson to facilitate understanding of what could be considered abstract concepts. The textbook-only approach to teaching catechetics is lost on this generation of visual learners. For example, using a battery powered robot is a great way to teach the concept of free will, and it is a lesson they will never forget. Visual teaching allows us to “teach up” instead of down. This is also true for children with various learning disabilities. Make time for questions. Questions are a sign that children and teens are processing the catechesis. If they know they can ask questions, they will engage with the content.

WE'RE STILL IN CATECHESIS RECOVERY MODE

Intensity, another necessary element of successful interventions, only matters when and if the catechesis is explicit and correct doctrinally. We are still in the process of recovering from a decades long era of catechesis that was weak and ambiguous and did not do a good job of explaining to children and teens why they will always need the Church ... where even the centrality of Christ was greatly diminished and our

condition after the Fall was ignored as the *raison d'être* for the Church. In my upcoming book *Every Child a Theologian*, I discuss the ten doctrinal deficiencies identified by our bishops to have infected catechesis of recent decades so that parents and catechists can be on guard against their lingering influence.

When we remember that God created each of us with a soul specifically designed to know, love, and serve Him, we must acknowledge that there is a natural hunger already there needing to be spiritually fed or needing to be awakened. If we prioritized catechesis with the same focus we give to sports and other programs, the Church would turn the world upside down as did the early Church.



If the parish cannot provide this kind of intensity in catechesis, perhaps several parents in each parish could organize ongoing catechesis during the summer months and possibly even during the school year. Even a series on the lives of the saints could produce wonderful fruit and all age groups could be combined for these sessions. The lives of the saints teach theology by modeling how the truths of the Faith are lived out in a variety of situations.

In many ways, summer is ideal for intensive catechesis because it is not competing with the academic calendar. These months can offer deeper catechesis freed from the time constraints inherent in the academic school year. For older students, time should also be set aside to discuss in depth the moral issues of the day as they relate to the teachings of the Church.

The Great Commission (Matthew 28:18-20) includes the words, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. All instruction can be viewed as an intervention. It is meant to change the trajectory of the learner away from the path of least resistance. When catechesis is viewed as an intervention, every minute will count.

We are told by the Lord to go out and teach. We cannot afford to waste time in this endeavor. This means that every classroom minute devoted to catechesis must be about teaching, not coloring or cutting. Likewise, every retreat, sacramental or otherwise, must be about teaching. Instead of a superficial summer VBS, a summer-long series of going deeper rather than shallower should be our goal. Fast-paced learning games can help with retention and therefore should be included at the end of lessons. But everything superficial should be removed so that the teaching mission we were given is prioritized. This is what an intervention is, and catechesis is the grandest intervention.



ABOUT GEORGIE NORMAND, M.A

GEORGIE NORMAND, M.A. is an educator, longtime catechist, founder of Red Sea Catechetics™, and author of the upcoming book *Every Child a Theologian* and the *It's a Journey™* Sacramental Preparation Program for First Reconciliation and First Eucharist. She spent more than a decade as a second-grade sacramental preparation catechist at St. Matthew's Catholic Church in Jacksonville, Florida (Diocese of St. Augustine). Georgie is an educator who believes that the study of theology is important for all ages and that it can and should be digested by the youngest children with the help of visual teaching aids – in other words by “teaching up.” Her goal is to deepen today's catechesis of the young to help them better understand the Faith and to preempt the false idea that the Church is man's idea.

HER WORK IN THE FIELD OF LITERACY

As an educator, Georgie is best known for her efforts in the field of literacy. She turned her concern about the low reading scores in the US into solutions for teachers and students. After earning a master's degree in Reading Education, she developed a literacy screener that accurately identifies students in PreK-2 who are at risk for reading failure. She created an early literacy curriculum and PreK-12 intervention designed to prevent and address fluency deficits and other problems common in struggling readers - including those with dyslexia. To support teachers and tutors who work with these students, she also developed a comprehensive professional development program. Her many articles on dyslexia have been featured in *Exceptional Parent Magazine*.