

**The Catholic Vision of Catechesis**

**and**

**A Basic Syllabus for Catechesis in the Catholic Faith**

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## **The Catholic Vision of Catechesis**

“Catechesis is not simply education.” During my formation at seminary, the one clear message hammered into the students was about what Catechesis WASN’T. Helping another person to understand and live out the Catholic Faith is not equivalent to passing on the factual content of an academic subject. So far so good – but if that’s too limited a view of catechesis, what IS Catechesis? There is an answer, and it is to be found in the rather impenetrable text of the [General Directory for Catechesis](#) (GDC), published in 1997 by the Vatican’s *Congregation for the Clergy*.<sup>All numbers in superscript are paragraph references to the GDC.</sup>

**The best way to think of Catechesis is as an “apprenticeship” – training in the principles and application of Christian Living.**

The stirring of faith is the starting point for catechesis.<sup>56,61-62</sup> “God sent his only begotten Son so that whosoever **will**, may be saved.” (Jn 3:16).

As soon as there is a person who is **willing** to learn more about Jesus Christ or the Catholic faith, the task of *catechesis* begins. Thus catechesis is complementary to *primary evangelisation*, which is the task<sup>46-49</sup> of stirring up that initial interest in faith. All followers of Christ are commissioned to spread the Good News and share in this work of stirring, while recognising that only God plants the seed of faith in a human heart.<sup>244</sup> Good Catechesis is a catalyst for conversion<sup>29</sup> – but always dependent on the grace of God.

Belonging to a Christian community is an integral part of apprenticeship in Christian faith, and in one sense, all members of the community are catechists.<sup>156-159,220-221</sup> But certain members of the community act as catechists in a more formal sense, working with identifiable groups of seekers and of the faithful. Only a disciple of Christ can catechise others.<sup>142</sup>

***This document is a summary of the GDC in bullet-point form, aiming to include all key points from the GDC relevant to the task of PARISH CATECHESIS. The GDC contains other information relevant to those responsible for catechesis at diocesan level. Where the headings in this document are not clear, follow the paragraph references to look up the information in the GDC itself. You may also appreciate Bill Huebsch’s “[GDC in Plain English](#)” by Twenty-Third Publications.***

## **Who should receive catechesis?**<sup>67,258</sup>

- The person “whosoever” believes in Jesus
- Children preparing for First Holy Communion – at their age, a grounding in trust, freedom, self-giving, the Bible and prayer is important<sup>178</sup>
- CATECHUMENS – Adults who have not been baptised but who intend to follow Christ
- The “Only Baptised” including those whose faith is a simple piety, or at an immature, superficial or superstitious level<sup>25</sup>
- Those preparing for sacraments (*e.g.* couples before marriage, parents wanting children baptised) – an important link with the lapsed and the lost
  - For young people (*e.g.* confirmation age), spiritual direction/accompaniment may be more important than catechesis<sup>184</sup>
- Parents – that they may be more effective in raising their children in the faith<sup>220-221,227,255</sup>
- The shy and over-respectful deserve particular attention<sup>26</sup>
- Those mature in faith – that they may enter more deeply
- Particular professional, social, or geographical groups<sup>190-192</sup>
- The elderly – that they may be confirmed in hope<sup>186-188</sup>
- Catechesis for the handicapped should not be totally disconnected from the wider community<sup>189</sup>
  - *Note that because the word “catechumen” specifically refers to adults (or children of catechetical age) journeying towards baptism, all other categories of person are referred to in the GDC by the generic term “recipients of catechesis”.*

## **The Good Catechist:**<sup>235-247</sup>

- Must have a good personal relationship with Jesus Christ, God-the-Father, and the Holy Spirit
- Loves those who are to be catechised
- Is both teacher (by word) and witness (by way of life) of the Christian faith
- Draws on their own state in life (baptised, married, consecrated, ordained) in the way they catechise<sup>228-231</sup>
- Helps in the planning of catechetical activities<sup>225</sup>
- Is recognised as a practitioner of an ‘art’ who will deliver catechesis in their own personal and unique way
- Respects the freedom of conscience of each enquirer (aware of the [\*Instruction on Christian Freedom and Liberation\*](#))<sup>GDC footnote 347</sup>
- Requires good relationship skills, a grounding in basic psychology, human growth and group dynamics, and the “know-how” of transmitting the faith<sup>156-159</sup>
- Engages in reflective practice (learning from the past to improve future activities) and is able to learn ‘on the job’

**AIMS: Good Catechesis will**<sup>30,85-86</sup> –

- Start from the basis of RELATIONSHIP WITH JESUS CHRIST<sup>61-62</sup>
- Be centred on CHRIST and the TRIUNE GOD, with the theme of the KINGDOM woven throughout<sup>41,53-55,100-102</sup>
- Show how faith is founded on revelation – the WORDS and DEEDS of God<sup>38</sup> expressed in Scripture and Tradition, and clarified by the Magisterium
- Acknowledge the potential and limitation of human language as a vehicle for expressing faith<sup>146,203</sup>
- Put the *whole* Gospel across, not selective parts<sup>112,203</sup> – but the precise schema can be adapted according to circumstance,<sup>118,151</sup> e.g.
  - Start with God, who is incarnate with Christ; *or*
  - Start with Christ, who reveals the Father; *or*
  - Start with Man, who is made in the image of God... and
  - Begin from Revelation and apply to daily life; *or*
  - Reflect on Experience and seek the presence of God<sup>152</sup>
- Explain the basis of Christian Morality, including VIRTUES and the SERMON ON THE MOUNT
- Show how the liturgy embeds and celebrates what we believe
- Include a basic grounding in Church History
- Encourage those being catechised to reflect back to their sponsor or mentor what they have learned, and how they will apply it
- Respond to the questions which participants are asking<sup>172</sup>
- Equip Christians to become part of the Christian community and to maintain their faith while relating to others in a pluralistic culture<sup>193-194,197-200</sup>

**METHODS: Good Catechesis makes use of these methods, which are always at the service of CONTENT**<sup>149</sup> –

- Basic texts – the Bible, Creeds, liturgical texts<sup>150</sup>
- Memorizing key texts (e.g. creeds, prayers) – but first, they must be understood<sup>154</sup>
- Deductive method from basic doctrines
- Exposure to a range of liturgical experiences<sup>87</sup>
- Popular devotions<sup>195-196</sup>
- Mystagogical reflection by those who have taken part in rites
- Both traditional religious language (explaining it as required) and a balanced use of contemporary idioms<sup>78,97,112,203,208</sup>
- Reflecting on daily life – personal life and the “signs of the times”<sup>150</sup>
- Small groups, as a suitable place to enter more deeply<sup>258</sup>

**CONTENT: Good Catechesis communicates a balanced diet founded on**<sup>130</sup> –

***The three phases of Salvation History***<sup>97</sup>

- God’s revelation throughout the Old Testament
- The supreme revelation given in the words and deeds of Jesus Christ
- The continuing life of the Church from Pentecost until Christ comes again

***The four pillars of the [Catechism of the Catholic Church](#), which presents the comprehensive content***<sup>97,119-121</sup> ***of the Faith***

- The Creed – Christian doctrine
- The Seven Sacraments – communal worship and a proper understanding of Church
- The Ten Commandments – Christian morality
- The Lord’s Prayer – personal spirituality

**The GDC singles out the following as core beliefs:**<sup>16-18,30,100-104,175</sup>

- Jesus Christ as FULLY MAN and FULLY GOD, in the context of TRINITARIAN FAITH IN GOD
- The world is CREATED GOOD but TAINTED BY SIN
- SALVATION: We have hope because of Christ’s Resurrection – this requires a proper understanding of the balance of GRACE and SIN
- A PASSION FOR JUSTICE, which includes a preferential OPTION FOR THE POOR and the defence of HUMAN RIGHTS (of which the Catholic understanding is given in John XXIII’s [Pacem in Terris](#)); appreciation of the respective roles of the Church and of civil authorities.
- ESCHATOLOGY – our understanding of death, judgment, heaven, hell, and the resurrection of the body

**PRAXIS: Good Catechesis includes an apprenticeship in these practices**<sup>71,84-85,175</sup> –

- Prayer
- *Lectio Divina*
- Retreats
- Spiritual Direction
- Understanding the meaning of the sacraments
- Reflecting on the signs of the times
- Engaging with current moral questions
- Apologetics – an account of the “hope which is within us”
- Mission – all Christians are called to be witnesses to the Good News

**CONTEXT: Good Catechesis is sensitive to relevant cultural factors**<sup>20-23,39,197-208</sup> –

- A scientific world-view which cannot fully explain the mystery of the human person<sup>20</sup>
- Agnostic and atheistic trends
- Moral thinking based on relativism (*i.e.* no absolutes – choose the lesser of two evils) or consequentialism (*i.e.* the end justifies the means)
- Secularism – religion is marginalised, or all faiths are treated “equally” without regard to their distinct features and requirements
- New Age
- Structures of sin within the cultural milieu

**OUTCOMES: Good Catechesis results in**<sup>24,82-83</sup> –

- Knowledge of the Triune God, and of God as a merciful Father
- Knowledge of Jesus as God-made-man, and faith in Jesus and His Message<sup>41,53-55,92</sup>
- Zeal for mission (making Christ known) and social justice – even in the face of persecution
- Ability to pray
- Understanding of what it means to live a Christian life, and the willingness to do so
- **A meaningful profession of faith by the one who has been catechised**<sup>66</sup>

**Catholic Schools**<sup>260</sup>

*Religious Instruction* is distinct from Catechesis.

*Religious Instruction* is a formal academic subject which stands alongside the other humanities – the beliefs and practices of the Catholic faith are studied using the same critical approach which can be applied to other religions and Christian denominations.<sup>73</sup>

Catechesis is an apprenticeship in living out the Catholic faith.

Where a school has a high proportion of Catholic students, it can offer this apprenticeship.

Where the proportion of Catholics in a school is relatively low, the school’s task leans more towards making sure that the Catholic faith is well understood by those who are not actively seeking to follow it.

## A Basic Syllabus for Catechesis in the Catholic Faith

The word “syllabus” usually suggests an academic subject – a package of information to be learned and understood. The Catholic Faith is not an academic subject, but a way of life. The best way to think of Catechesis is as an “apprenticeship” – a course in the principles and application of Christian Living. Nevertheless, it is possible to offer a syllabus. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (CCC) is explicitly identified as an exhaustive list of aspects of Catholic Faith. Together with the General Directory for Catechesis (GDC) it defines what this apprenticeship should consist of.

***For any given topic in the syllabus, it is important to explore the following aspects:***<sup>127-128</sup>

- Where is this belief rooted in God’s Revelation (Scripture & Tradition)?
- What major statements has the Magisterium made on this subject?
- What traditional theological terms need to be defined, and approached using contemporary idioms?
- Where is this belief expressed or celebrated in the Church’s liturgy?
- How is this belief illustrated in art or music?
- How does my personal prior experience relate to aspects of this belief?
- Can we demonstrate how this belief affects lives, perhaps using testimonies from participants and catechists?
- What demands will this belief make of me? (Or if revisiting a topic, what demands **has** it made of me in my Christian life?)

The [Excel spreadsheet](#) (or [PDF summary](#)) which accompanies this document contains a detailed syllabus intended for RCIA, since the adult catechumenate is meant to be the prototype of all forms of catechesis. Those topics picked out in **highlight** are those singled out by the GDC as especially important.

The Syllabus is organised under 19 broad headings. Most of these have subdivisions, giving a total of 88 possible topics, each of which could be a session of catechesis in its own right. Ideally, this would be delivered as a 2-year course beginning in March and breaking for Easter, August and Christmas. Neighbouring parishes could start in alternate years or even 4 parishes could co-ordinate, staggering their starts, two in March and two in September. On completion of the full cycle, a catechumen would move on to the period of purification and enlightenment with initiation at Easter or Christmas/All Saints/Christ the King.

Where, for pastoral reasons, a course of catechesis must be fitted into the time available from September until the start of Lent, or comply with a diocesan requirement that “a course of 20 sessions must have been attended”, the 19 headings, together with the **highlighted topics**, will provide a minimum course content; it is, of course, desirable to examine briefly as many of the 88 topics as possible within the course.

The ordering of topics given here is not the only possible ordering, but it represents a natural progression of God who reveals – God who is revealed – our response to God, with three cycles going deeper into the Christian mystery – the Revelation of God – Sin, Redemption and Eternal Life – the Trinity and Human Relationships. Any other ordering preserving the key issues and avoiding reliance on subjects yet to be covered, is acceptable.