

National Initiative on Adolescent Catechesis

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The National Symposium on Adolescent Catechesis An Executive Summary

The waters of catechesis have been flowing for several millennia, leading believers to a way of life rooted in Jesus Christ. Over the years the landscape of catechesis and formation in Christ, especially of the young, has been altered by such forces as culture, technology, media and family. More recently, key research findings such as the *National Study of Youth and Religion* point toward a substantial block occurring in the religious formation of young people (and parents) today. This cultural and societal dam to religious growth has challenged our current catechetical mentalities; calling the Church to review and renew the systems, models and methods that were once used to catechize adolescents. This is the reality which gave rise to the National Initiative on Adolescent Catechesis (NIAC) and its cornerstone event, the National Symposium on Adolescent Catechesis.

The four day National Symposium was held near Baltimore in Linthicum Heights, MD in November, 2008 and served as the second step in a seven year National Initiative facilitated by the Partnership for Adolescent Catechesis, a collective effort by the National Federation for Catholic Youth Ministry, the National Catholic Educational Association, the National Conference for Catechetical Leadership, with support from the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. The Symposium began with a provoking question: "*What is necessary for effective adolescent catechesis in the Catholic Church given the current and emerging environments in the United States?*"

The one hundred and eighteen academicians, practitioners, and national leaders attending the National Symposium on Adolescent Catechesis proved to be an impressive think tank. Together they represented fifteen national organizations, ten universities, seven publishers, and numerous parishes, schools, diocesan officials and bishops from over thirty-five dioceses. During the Symposium, participants heard from experts in adolescence and catechesis as well as reflections on those practicing in the field and even of young people themselves through video interviews and a live "fish bowl" session. Symposium participants joined in table groups for facilitated discussions covering issues such as the critical cultural realities facing young people, outcomes of effective catechesis, characteristics of the formative community, systems and approaches of catechesis, and emerging directions.

Through this dynamic Symposium process, several themes emerged:

A Project of the Partnership for Adolescent Catechesis



Collaboration

The Symposium was collaboration at its best. The national organizations comprising the Partnership for Adolescent Catechesis joined together and prepared for three years to produce the process that became the Symposium. Colleagues in parishes, schools, dioceses, organizations, and universities dialogued, each offering their unique perspective that led the entire group toward a shared direction. For catechesis to be successful, this model needs to be replicated at both the diocesan and local levels.

Diversity

The reality of the Catholic Church in the United States is that it is not a homogenous community. It is full of the rich diversity of cultures, economies, and physical settings. Young people are immersed in a variety of educational, familial, and cultural experiences. This diversity need not only be respected, but embraced. Approaches to catechesis must also be diverse, seeking to capitalize on the unique experiences and gifts of the community in which adolescents are immersed.

Comprehensiveness

Catechesis must be evangelizing - engaging the heart of young people to know and love the One who loved them first, Jesus Christ. The key to effective catechesis is through addressing the cognitive, affective, and behavioral aspects of the adolescent. The content of catechesis must be comprehensive, providing a strong understanding of the teaching and practices of the Catholic faith while immersing youth in the life and mission of the Church through service and ministry. Bishop Richard Malone of Portland, Maine indicated in his general session address that the heart of the issue is to offer a catechesis that "can arouse faith in Christ as well as form, inform, and transform that faith."

Supporting and Forming Family Faith

Fostering the faith of the parent, encouraging family faith rituals, and supporting families in their diversity of experiences will provide the critical foundation young people need to grow in their lives as active Catholics. To take this step with the next generation, new energy and focus must be given to helping married couples as they grow into formative families of faith.

Formation of Catechists

Regarding Catholic school teachers, parish catechists and youth ministers, Boston College professor, Dr. Thomas Groome, suggested in his presentation that a new comprehensive and intensive national focus on formation is needed to provide the skills and knowledge for these individuals to catechize with confidence.

Challenging the Status Quo

Sean Reynolds, Director of Youth Ministry for the Archdiocese of Cincinnati, challenged the participants on whether "our preoccupation with conventional religious education" has prevented us from analyzing the context in which catechesis occurs. The resulting discussion identified that for adolescent catechesis to be successful, those involved in the development must not be afraid to look at the entire system in which catechesis is immersed.

The Symposium process led to the development of several areas of focus for continued work. These areas provide a tentative framework that will serve to structure the efforts of the National Initiative on Adolescent Catechesis.

- **Ministry with parents and families** – providing the support needed to grow as a family in faith.
- **Cultural considerations** – seeking to raise awareness of the needs of the variety of communities as well as increasing the "cultural competency" of those in ministry.
- **Formation and training** – surveying the field to identify best practices as well as gaps in current training programs and working together with others to develop new formation models to meet the current and future needs of those involved in adolescent catechesis.
- **Resources** – identify and placing the richness of the foundational documents in evangelization and catechesis into the hands of those catechizing, and insuring all current and future resources are accessible and multi-lingual.
- **Advocacy** – clarifying the message of effective adolescent catechesis, strengthening the collaborative efforts of diverse organizations and agencies, and communicating these messages to all who are involved and impacted.
- **Research** – establishing what it means to be effective in catechesis, seeking to discover not only what is working, but what is not, as well as identifying effective practices in a variety of ministerial settings.
- **Models and methodology** – developing practical and engaging methods in light of the larger narrative and the system through which adolescent catechesis is best expressed so that local models can be effectively personalized for each unique situation and culture.

The post Symposium steps for the Partnership on Adolescent Catechesis will be to map out the directions set forth through the Symposium process by working with the task groups listed above to develop and prioritize specific strategies that will serve as the backbone for the next steps of the National Initiative. Additional steps involve the conduction and support of dozens of "Virtual Symposiums" being sponsored locally across the country in 2009 and the publication in April of the Symposium presentations and outcomes in a second sourcebook that will be available through each Partnership organization.

Given the multitude of strategies already proposed by the task groups, it is clear that the reality of the work ahead for those who are involved in adolescent catechesis is plentiful, but the common consensus stated clearly at the Symposium is that our young people are worth it. The thirst for comprehensive faith formation is both imminent and widespread, yet more than ever before, we are up to the task.

More information on the National and Virtual Symposiums and the National Initiative on Adolescent Catechesis is available at: www.adolescentcatechesis.org. For additional information, contact Ela Milewska, NIAC project coordinator, at elam@nfcym.org