

# Five Core Methodologies for Catechesis

*Suzanne Nelson, Mary Beaudoin, and Rob Maro*

By engaging a variety of methods drawn from the fields of education and communication theology, catechists can better facilitate the dialogue between God and God's people that is at the heart of catechesis. Moreover, catechists themselves are the medium in and through which other methodologies become valuable and can be enlisted to help strengthen and deepen people's faith.

Though the church does not espouse one particular methodology for transmitting the faith, she does remind us of a methodology called the "pedagogy of God." The *General Directory for Catechesis* (GDC) examines contemporary catechetical methods in light of the "pedagogy of God" and encourages us, as does St. Paul, to "use with liberty everything that is true, everything that is noble, everything that is good and pure, everything that we love and honor and everything that can be thought virtuous or worthy of praise" (GDC 148; Phil 4:8). Catechesis can be called "a pedagogy of faith," an "untiring echo" of the dialogue that God undertakes with each person (GDC 144). A "catechetical methodology" can be understood as a medium, a tool, a method, or even a personality that, in harmony with the Holy Spirit, enriches faith and makes it "living, conscious, and active"

*Suzanne Nelson is a writer and teacher who facilitates retreats, courses, and consultations in the field of pastoral theology, especially in the greater Washington, D.C., area.*

*Mary Beaudoin is director of religious education at Saint Raphael Church in Rockville, Md.; she is also very active in the National Association of Pastoral Musicians.*

*Rob Maro is the director of religious education at the Shrine of the Most Blessed Sacrament Catholic Church in Washington, D.C.*

(*General Catechetical Directory* 17). In this article, we distill and summarize five core methodologies from the fields of education and communication theology and apply them to general catechesis.

In the past, many educators have relied heavily on the verbal/linguistic and logical/mathematical types of intelligence, but in recent years they have been encouraged and trained to use methods that will engage the whole range of types of intelligence and interest. In 1983 Howard Gardner, professor of education at Harvard University, published his theory on multiple intelligences and underscored the need to expand educational methodologies in order to engage the various types of “intelligence”: verbal/linguistic (word smart), logical/mathematical (reasoning and number smart), visual/spatial (picture smart), bodily/kinesthetic (body smart), musical/rhythmic (music smart), interpersonal (people smart), intrapersonal (self smart), and naturalistic (nature smart) (see Gardner; Armstrong and Armstrong 1994). It is increasingly clear that for effective catechesis to happen we need a comprehensive tool kit of methodologies and we need to engage catechists in using all of them and engage learners by using all of them.

One bridge between educational and catechetical methodology may be the emerging field of communication theology, which brings together the principles of communication theory and theological understandings of revelation. At its root, the word *communication* implies the creation of a kind of “common living space” and the exchange of “gifts” (see Eilers and Eilers 2004). God seeks such communication with us where we are, and the gift exchanged is God’s own self in Jesus. We experience this communication in liturgy, in sacraments and in loving actions, including the actions of teaching and learning that we generally call “catechesis.”

Communication theology urges us to probe our cultural context and find ways to dialogue with it in order to do catechesis in its midst. Robert Leavitt revisits Jürgen Habermas’s theory that there are three classes of human knowledge and each one is grounded in and controlled by a specific human interest. “1) Scientific-technical knowledge is guided by an *instrumental interest* in controlling and manipulating reality; 2) humanistic knowledge is shaped by a *communicative interest* in understanding human nature; 3) socio-critical knowledge is motivated by an *emancipatory interest* in overcoming ideologies and distorted communication” (Leavitt, 70–71). Leavitt suggests that reflecting on technology, tradition, and

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emancipation is one way to appreciate the different challenges culture poses for ministry of the Word today (Leavitt, 70–71). We propose here that effective catechesis requires attention to the interests and aptitudes of the learner and the influence of culture, in combination with the skillful use of technology, awareness of tradition, and action that fosters emancipation. The catechetical methodologies discussed in this paper are presented as a foundation on which to base more research and discussion. The five core catechetical methodologies discussed here are: storytelling, critical thinking, art and environment, service, and the person of the catechist.

## *Storytelling*

*All these things Jesus spoke to the crowds in parables. He spoke to them only in parables, to fulfill what had been said through the prophet: “I will open my mouth in parables; I will announce what has lain hidden from the foundation of the world.”*  
(Matt 13:34 NAB)

Jesus often told short stories in combination with other methodologies, such as critical thinking, environment, and his own personal actions, so that the story would lead the listener to a new insight about God, break open a truth, or spark a desire to change. The methodology of storytelling takes a great variety of forms, including direct narration, role playing, dramatic reading, comedy, creative writing, autobiography, biography, mime, faith sharing, musicals, original parables, and myths. Stories are told through many types of media, e.g., videography, television newscasts, film clips, email, YouTube, Podcasts, and Blogs, to name a few.

No matter where the story comes from or what shape it takes, a catechist will use it skillfully to move the listener to deeper faith. (Listening skills may also need to be taught.) Carla Rieger, motivational speaker and expert on creative people skills in the workplace, highlights five key elements of every good story. They are easy to remember as: *Platform* (What was life like every day?); *Tilt* (What happened to change the “status quo?” Rock the boat a little.); *Consequences* (“What happens as result of the tilt? How is life affected by this?); *Resolution* (How is this new situation dealt with? It can be good or bad.); *New Platform* (What is life like “from that day on?”) (Rieger).

One way to enhance one’s personal storytelling skills is to look for the “surprise” insights that come from personal experience and capture them in a notebook or computer file for use later on. Classic stories in books, plays, or film are other good sources of storytelling material.

Examples of the creative use of storytelling in catechesis include: (1) Role play: Turn favorite Bible stories (i.e., parables) into a play format for the listener to read

and enact. This works with any age group, even adults. (2) Create a class newspaper or videotaped “newscast”: Retell famous biblical stories as if they were happening today. (3) Tell modern parables: After reading some of Jesus’ parables, ask the learners to create a “modern parable” using a familiar object, e.g., popcorn, cell phone, a new car, a football game. It helps to start with a common theme, e.g., “The kingdom of heaven is like a football game. . . .” (4) Faith sharing: One person at a time shares a personal story related to a theme, e.g., “calm coming after a storm.” The others (“listeners”) share their insights.

The effects of good stories are deep and lasting, especially when the catechist leads the learner to discover how the story illustrates God’s relationship with us in some way. Sharing the stories of our lives can let the “pedagogy of God” work through these stories to transform the events of life into lessons of wisdom (GDC 139).

In fact, the need for stories is so great that they seem to create themselves. Storyteller Ursula LeGuin is quoted as saying, “There have been great societies that did not use the wheel, but there have been no societies that did not tell stories.” Perhaps the most important storytelling skill of all is the catechist’s ability to sense the listener’s need for a particular story at a particular time.

## ***Critical Thinking***

*Jesus asked them, “But who do you say that I am?” Peter said in reply, “The Messiah of God.” (Luke 9:20)*

Variations on the theme of critical thinking include questioning, debates, agree-disagree discussions, interviews, group problem solving, theological reflection, Bible study, pretests and post tests, case studies, and more. Here are some specific applications of critical thinking as a catechetical methodology using dialogue, debate, and questioning.

### ***Dialogue***

Dialogue is a particular style of “discussion.” Used in catechesis, it stimulates participation and opens people to the “dialogue of salvation” that God continues to have with people (Paul VI, 72; Pontifical Council 9, 10). During formal catechesis, dialogue can take many forms and can be used with a large group, small groups, or one-on-one. It can be woven into panel discussions, agree-disagree discussions (physically move to position on a continuum line), brainstorming, and case studies or current events articles followed by discussion. A skillful catechist can incorporate inductive and deductive reasoning, proclamation of the catechetical message, and the personal experience of the learners (GDC 150, 151).

## ***Debate***

Debate can be used to raise awareness of controversial contemporary topics in the light of Christ's teaching. Two or three debaters form a team to represent each side of the question. After each person has used the set time to present the topic, they then use a set time to "rebut" points stated by the other team. Next, the discussion is opened to the whole group. Catechists need to construct debate statements carefully, avoiding statements that are against church teaching. For example, rather than say: "For or against: The death penalty is a moral good," instead make a statement that could be true or false, depending on the evidence gathered and presented, e.g. "For or against: The death penalty has protected innocent citizens."

## ***Questioning***

Many types of questioning, including factual, convergent, divergent, and evaluative questions, as well as combinations of them, can be used to stimulate critical thinking. Questions should be stated clearly, not ambiguously, and directed to the entire group. An example of "convergent" questioning is the Socratic method that is used to develop a fuller understanding of a problem or issue. It is a "convergent" type of questioning because it generally leads to a single solution or resolution. It is usually directed by the catechist.

Since those who are being questioned need time to think, the person who asks the questions should pause for 2–3 seconds before asking someone to give an answer. This "wait-time" of 2–3 seconds can seem like a very long time to the leader of the discussion. Further, questions that foster critical thinking do not have to put a person on the spot. Avoiding "conscience questions" is important, especially in discussions about moral issues. For example, it is better to ask, "What would a person of integrity do in this case?" rather than, "What would *you* do in this case?"

As a catechetical methodology, critical thinking helps learners to explore and articulate the ways in which faith and reason are intertwined. "Though faith is above reason, there can never be any real discrepancy between faith and reason. Since the same God who reveals mysteries and infuses faith has bestowed the light of reason on the human mind, God cannot deny himself, nor can truth ever contradict truth" (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* 159).

## ***Art and Environment***

*On another occasion Jesus began to teach by the sea. A very large crowd gathered around him so that he got into a boat on the sea and sat down. And the whole crowd was beside the sea on land. And he taught them at length. . . . (Mark 4:1-2)*

Environment and art can be powerful portals to the transmitting of faith if catechists are attentive to the space the sights and the sounds that surround the

learners. Catechists should not overlook any visual, aural, or tactile media, but rather use them as methods to enliven and enrich faith.

The church has long understood the power of art in transmitting faith. Consider the great cathedrals, music, and visual art that have inspired Christians for many centuries. The recent emphasis on multiple intelligences and learning styles has made us more aware of the fact that humans learn in many different and wonderful ways, including through music, dance, and art. The *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* makes clear the central place of the arts in our faith. “The fine arts are rightly classed among the noblest activities of human genius; this is especially true of religious art and of its highest achievement, sacred art. Of their nature the arts are directed toward expressing in some way the infinite beauty of God in works made by human hands” (CSL 122).

In theological perspective, we believe that God uses the arts to communicate with us. In turn, we use the arts to express our love for God. This “common living space” and exchange of “gifts” is the root of liturgical experience. Catechists can take cues from liturgy and its teaching styles.

The catechetical environment and all of the arts can be entry points for engaging the various types of intelligence and interests. Here are a few ways to tap into the power of the arts in religious formation: display pictures (as good artistic quality as you can find); play background music for reflection times; sing songs; play instruments; dance or respond to rhythm in other ways; read a poem; draw, paint, sculpt; tour your own church, or go on a field trip to visit other places of worship, share a meal; set up a “Gallery Walk” of art prints to appreciate and discuss; use symbols and sacramentals, flowers, fabrics, candles.

Use the learning space itself as a tool. Begin by arranging the space to facilitate sharing, eye contact, aural communication, ease of movement, comfort, and beauty. Create a welcoming space by asking yourself how the space makes you feel when you enter it. How will the learners feel? Be aware of air quality, lighting, ambiance, and everything that surrounds the learner. Add color and life to the space, e.g., a plant, a swatch of cloth, a painting, a sculpture, etc. Take the learners into a different area, e.g., outdoors, to the church, on a field trip. Display related art prints or art created by the learners. Set up a prayer space/corner. Have a special place to gather in front of or around as you pray together. Keep a copy of the Bible visible all the time. Direct the learners to change the items in the prayer space to reflect the liturgical year. Play reflective music. Form a musical “group.” Invite learners who can play an instrument to do so. Encourage musical composition—e.g., a great amen, a responsorial psalm. Create lyrics,

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spoken texts, poetry, and word chants. Invite learners to pray using dance, rhythm, voice.

These are but a few ideas to “prime the pump” of creative catechetical methodology and make the most of art and environment.

## *Service*

*What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works?*

(Jas 2:14)

Many would agree that service learning has become an integral and effective component in most schools: public, private, and Catholic, as well as in parish social justice ministries. We know that people need to integrate what they learn in the classroom or in parish programs in order for it to be effective. The ministry of catechesis demands this integration in a deeper sense.

The gospels contain countless examples of this integration in the life of Jesus who, with a caring attitude, immersed himself in the community and led its focus back to God. He related to all types of people: the poor, the brokenhearted, the sick, the women at the well, and even the money changers.

The GDC is clear that people of faith cannot be passive learners. Baptism evokes a profound awareness of our call to holiness and a “livelier sense of mutual service in charity” (27). Consequently, in order for the transmission of the faith to take root and truly be effective, it must be expressed in acts of service and charity.

Today, most parishes boast a strong service component in their confirmation preparation and the RCIA process. Catholic social teaching provides a wonderful framework for creating service learning projects, designing retreats, or having thoughtful discussions in order to link gospel teaching to current life issues and discuss appropriate involvements. Some examples, based on the seven themes of Catholic social teaching (USCCB Department of Justice), are listed here:

- *Life and Dignity of the Human Person.* Participate in the annual Right to Life Mass and March for Life. Write letters to local government representatives asking them to promote the dignity of the human person and oppose anti-life legislation.
- *Call to Family, Community, and Participation.* Collect items for the poor and needy; “adopt” a homeless family and send them meals.
- *Rights and Responsibilities.* Become aware of the church’s impact on the local neighborhood or city by mapping the area, then researching and labeling the church’s influence there. Discuss: What has been done, by whom? What still needs to be done?

- *Option for the Poor and Vulnerable.* “Hunger Banquets” are an effective way to teach students about world poverty and how they can make a difference. Teach the concept of stewardship by creating a budget and include giving a portion to the poor.
- *The Dignity of Work and the Rights of Workers.* Teach the meaning of work and discuss the connection between faith and a meaningful day’s work. Call attention to the personal gifts and talents of the learners and discuss their responsibility for using them in meaningful ways.
- *Solidarity.* Various parish groups can make and send care packages to soldiers, the ill, seminarians, or those away at college.
- *Care for God’s Creation.* Catechists can motivate students to recycle paper and plastic, participate in a neighborhood cleanup, use energy efficient lighting, and carpool by linking these things to the concept of God’s creation.

The *General Directory for Catechesis* reminds us that catechetical pedagogy is only effective “to the extent that the Christian community becomes a point of concrete reference for the faith journey of individuals” (GDC 158). With this in mind, we view the community as a place of unique faith formation as it provides a faith-witness beyond the confines of the classroom. As members of a pluralistic culture, there is a need to find common ground. The Golden Rule is one moral norm found in all major religions (see McKenna). Jesus expressed it as, “Love your neighbor as yourself.” Catholic social teaching implies that we can find common ground and exchange gifts in the Golden Rule.

Finally, an effective catechist will invite learners to reflect on their service and involvement in the community and encourage them to express their reflection in creative ways. Younger children, for example, might verbally share their experience and follow that by drawing a picture or writing a poem. Older children and adults can reflect in a journal about their experiences, concerns, hopes, and insights. They can express those insights by composing a prayer, singing a song, creating a sculpture, or even writing a book.

### ***The Person of the Catechist***

*But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you, and you will be my witnesses. . . .* (Acts 1:8)

A catechist can be called by many names: mentor, confidant, teacher, listener, prophet, mother/father, facilitator, challenger; but essentially a catechist is a “mediator who facilitates communication between people and the mystery of God” (GDC 156).

Catechists, whose very presence is a kind of “methodology,” are in many ways similar to good teachers. The classic “onion model” is used to describe various dimensions of a teacher. Beginning in the center, the “layers” are mission, identity, beliefs, competencies and behavior. Each layer affects the others and all of them interact with—and can be influenced by—the environment (see Korthagen). The outer two layers are the most easily observed and evaluated by others, and they do influence the inner three. The inner three “core qualities,” however, greatly influence the outer two (Korthagen; Ofman).

In the 1800s, Saint Julie Billiart, patron saint of catechists, named behaviors that should be visible in a catechist. They are: prayerfulness, generosity, sacrifice, a sense of responsibility, knowledge, prudence, respect for the dignity of the individual, a sense of authority and cheerfulness (in St. John). This list is remarkably similar to current listings of “essential qualities” of teachers, e.g., empathy, compassion, understanding, tolerance, and flexibility (Tickle); a strong sense of self-worth, deep feelings of love and respect for all people, and a hunger for truth and knowledge (Stoddard).

Other behaviors and qualities of an effective catechist that might spring from these essentials are: willingness to learn and grow (humility); self-confidence in the role of catechist; accurate articulation of the content of the faith; building relationships where catechesis can happen, e.g., smiling at people, speaking to them, calling them by name, showing interest in their lives; being generous with praise and cautious with criticism.

The charism given to the catechist by the Holy Spirit, along with a solid spirituality and transparent witness of life, constitutes the soul of every method. Only the catechist’s human and Christian qualities guarantee a good use of catechetical methodologies (GDC 156). The catechist is the medium in and through which other methodologies become valuable in the ministry of the Word called catechesis.

### *Fostering the Dialogue*

The heart of catechesis is a kind of dialogue between God and a person or a people, which matures so that faith becomes living, conscious, and active and the relationship with God in Christ is strengthened. A catechist, as a kind of midwife, facilitates this dialogue through the use of catechetical methodologies, along with a sense of timing and awareness of the readiness and needs of the learners. Each of the core methodologies described here takes on various forms in various cultures and among people with different interests and learning styles. *Storytelling* has a wider audience than ever before. As Frances Forde Plude, a leader in the emerging field of communication theology, reminds us, most of our stories are told today through media channels—fiction, news stories, advertising stories—and global audiences interact with these stories as they view them (see Plude). *Critical*

*thinking* may seem to be a methodology that is jeopardized by the current speed of technology and the pace of life. Catechists may have to invent methods of critical thinking that take into account the many networks people participate in to arrive at meaning. Conference calls, e-mailing, or instant messaging may have to be a part of the process of arriving at a thoughtful conclusion in today's wired world. The core methodology of *art and environment* includes ritual and ceremony. Even a quick look at the ritual and ceremony involved in a football game or music concert reveals how important this methodology is in U.S. culture. We honor *service*, especially the spirit of giving to those who are less fortunate. Even if it is not universally practiced, service is modeled even by movie stars and football heroes. It is the catechist who develops the reasons *why* we do service. And finally the *person of the catechist*: There is an old saying, "Who you are speaks so loudly, I can't hear what you're saying." In the person of the catechist, the medium really is the message. It's important that it be the Gospel message.

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