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Introduction

*Working Smarter, Not Harder* is written for you, the parish or parochial school catechist, whether you are about to engage in the catechetical ministry for the first time or you are a veteran in search of a needed pick-me-upper. The intent is to help you develop or spruce up on the basic attitudes and skills necessary to be an enthusiastic and effective catechist.

Well-managed and effective class settings do not just happen. They are created by catechists like you who know the type of setting that can facilitate learning and who possess the skills to create it. There is no magic trick to doing it. Whether your classes are held in a parish religious education center, a parochial school, or your own home, the information and activities in this book will assist you in developing the confidence and skills to feel secure and to be effective in your efforts to faithfully share the light of faith.

Catechists who can manage their classroom settings are confident, understand the teaching/learning process, are aware of the characteristics of the age level they are teaching, understand the subject matter, and are aware of the strengths and weaknesses of the environment in which they are teaching. Effective catechists have well-managed class settings, and well-managed class settings tend to produce effective catechists. You can be effective as a catechist. *Working Smarter, Not Harder* can help you become one. The worksheets and “notes” sections throughout the book are designed to help you in this endeavor. Use them to record those ideas and activities that you find helpful and how you will apply them to your preparation and teaching.

*Working Smarter, Not Harder* provides you with a way of thinking about class management and practical suggestions for achieving a well-managed class setting in which teaching and learning can take place and be enjoyable. Everyone wants to succeed at what they set out to do. Success is the sense of confidence and achievement that comes from having done one’s job to the best of one’s abilities. If you take the time to read this book and put into practice the suggestions made, you will be on your way to becoming the effective and successful catechist you want to be.

Read on.
1. Being a Catechist

When Frederick had finished, they all applauded.
“But Frederick,” they said, “you are a poet!”
Frederick blushed, took a bow, and said shyly, “I know it.”
Leo Leonni, Frederick

What Is a Catechist?

Frederick was not a catechist. He was a field mouse in a chatty family of field mice. But he was a special field mouse because he was called to a special task. While the other members of his family worked day and night to gather corn and nuts and wheat and straw for the long cold winter, Frederick gathered sun rays, colors and words. Somehow he knew that these were going to be important, and they were. When the corn and nuts and wheat were gone, Frederick, through his words, was able to bring the warming rays of the sun and the beautiful colors of the blue periwinkles and red poppies to help his family survive the winter. Frederick, the poet, knew from the beginning what he was doing.

Before we can begin to talk about working smarter, you need to ask yourself what it is that you are expected to do as a catechist. Like Frederick, you need to know from the outset what your role is. The term catechist has a long history in the Church, but it is not a word that is often used in everyday conversation. When you were being recruited by your parish or school to be a catechist, you, no doubt, understood it to mean a religion teacher. You were right. To be a catechist is to be a teacher, but a teacher with a special task.

The term catechist comes from a Greek word meaning “to echo.” The Church has the responsibility of handing on the faith, of echoing the Word of God, to its own generation and to succeeding generations. This is the catechetical ministry. In the early church if one assumed this task, he or she was called a catechist, a person responsible for echoing the message of Jesus to the community. Today, as in the past, people actively involved in the formal ministry of handing on the faith are called catechists. By choosing to become involved in your parish or school’s religious education (catechetical) program, you became a catechist in this long tradition. You assumed the responsibility of handing on the Catholic faith tradition.
What Does It Mean to Catechize – To Hand on the Faith?

If you are like the majority of catechists, this is one of your first questions: “What did I get myself into?” You feel totally unprepared for the task. “I’m not the person to walk into a class and tell people what they are supposed to believe.” Good! Because a catechist is not a person who tells others what they must believe. In fact, if you did this you would not be catechizing.

According to the National Directory for Catechesis, “Ongoing catechesis fosters the growth of a mature faith in the members of the community. It aims to make each person’s faith ‘living, explicit and active ...enlightened by doctrine.’” Catechesis concerns itself with both the discovery of faith, the faithful transmission of the tradition and incorporation into the life of the community. And this cannot be done if your only concern is with telling the students what to believe.

Your task as a catechist is to echo the Word of God in such a way that the faith of your students may mature and the Christian story may be faithfully handed on. This is done through an instructional process which provides opportunities for a student’s faith to be discovered, named, nurtured, challenged, and affirmed by the echoed message which is found in the scriptures, the church’s traditions and practices, and his or her own experience. As a catechist you are responsible for both nurturing the faith of the student and preserving the faith of the community. To fulfill this responsibility, you must create an instructional environment which allows for both the development of faith and the handing on of the tradition. The creation of this type of environment, whether it is in a school setting or a living room, necessitates your possessing the management skills of an effective teacher.

What Does an Effective Teacher Do?

You already have an image of what a well-managed learning environment looks like, and it, no doubt, has a lot to do with the way in which you were educated as a child. It may even resemble the classroom of your favorite teacher. What is your image? Take a few minutes to think about it. Use the worksheet on page 6 to describe it. What do you see? What is the teacher doing? What are the students doing? What does the class itself look like?

Believe it or not, most people tend to teach the way they were taught. You are probably no different. When you begin teaching, especially if you are not formally trained to be a teacher, and often even if you are, you are going to fall back on what you know, what is familiar to you. The image you have just described may be your ticket to becoming a successful catechist or a sure guide to failure. Let’s take some time to analyze your image.
If you were educated in a teacher-centered class, your image may be one where all of the learners are seated in their desks with their eyes dutifully focused on the teacher. The teacher is in the front of the room and is talking to the class. This is a very common image. And its focus, the teacher, is one of the key elements in effective class management. But this is an incomplete image. There are four essential elements that must be considered in the teaching act.

Perhaps you imagined a setting where the learners were actively engaged in groups or individually in various activities appropriate to their age level. The teacher moved from group to group as a resource person. Again, this is a common image. If it is yours, you have centered on the activities of both the learners and the teacher. But this image, too, is incomplete. Effective teaching is the result of the successful interaction of four variables. You have identified the teacher and the learners. What do you think the other two variables are?

Reflect on your image and the two images given above. What is there to be concerned about in addition to the teacher and the learners? In the first image the teacher is talking. She or he is communicating content. In the second image the learners are involved in activities, learning a particular content. This content is the third variable and is best described as the subject matter. Finally, in both images and in your own, the teacher and the learners are interacting with the subject matter in a particular setting. This setting, the learning environment, is the fourth variable.

**Four Variables to Be Considered in the Teaching Act**

- Teacher
- Subject Matter
- Student
- Learning Environment

Effective teaching results from these four variables working together so that the teacher teaches and the learners learn. In your situation, you, as catechist, are the teacher; your students are the learners; the subject matter is to be found in your textbook series; and the setting where your class is held is the learning environment. As a catechist you have the task of creating an instructional environment in which the faith of the learners may develop through planned activities based on the scriptures and the traditions of the Christian community.

**Why Are Class Management Skills So Important?**

One of the chief reasons teachers in any subject area give for leaving teaching after one, two or more years of teaching is problems with class management. Many individuals who have high ideals, strong intellectual ability, and a love of teaching leave their professions simply (or not so simply) because managing the class is more than they can handle. The reason parish catechists, like you, leave is no different.
Based on interviews with volunteer and professional teachers who have been teaching for more years than they care to remember or whose tenure was short-lived, we have found the failure to gain and maintain effective control in the class setting is the major cause of their giving up and throwing in the towel. Because they were ineffective class managers, these well-intentioned and talented individuals never had a chance to discover if they could be successful catechists.

**In Conclusion**

If you are concerned about whether or not you can effectively manage a class, you are on the right track. Effective class management should be a concern, a primary concern. As a catechist, good will and an active faith life will not cover for a lack of effective management skills in dealing with students. Without such skills you cannot hope to survive, much less to be successful. Your ministry as catechist requires that you be able to manage the four variables – teacher, learner, subject matter, and context or learning environment in a way that creates a setting for your students’ faith to become “living, conscious, and active through the light of instruction.” You can do this, if you work on developing the management skills of effective teachers. And you can. This book will help.

**Notes**