

Catechesis That Lasts a Lifetime

Many are the plans in the mind of a man, but it is the purpose of the LORD that will stand
Proverbs 19:21

It is the ongoing concern in every congregation, in every denomination, in every church body: **where are the young people?** What happened to them? Nearly everyone sees the problem—*declining attendance, lack of participation in congregational life, the youth falling away after confirmation and not coming back.* Maybe you have children, grandchildren, great grandchildren that are no longer attending worship. Maybe even you know of a family member who has never attended church (and has little to no interest in doing so).

So, we all see the problem. The question then becomes, “What do we do about it?” This question is not merely being asked at the congregational level, but at the district, synodical, worldwide level too. And there are many approaches suggested and taken. One part of the equation is the need for **evangelism**. *People need to hear about Jesus.* But what about the people who have heard about Jesus but now want nothing to do with Him? So, the other part I seek to address with this article is once they are here, *how might we keep them in the faith?* In other words, **how might we catechize them in a lasting way that they might not fall away?**

Catechesis is a word you might hear bandied about. It sounds technical and churchy and highfalutin. It simply means “the process of teaching the faith”. It is derived from the verb “to sound back and forth”. *To echo the faith.* But it’s more than teaching—it’s **imprinting the faith in such a way that it leaves an impression.** Catechesis is not just acquiring knowledge, *it is being formed and shaped by Christ and the Spirit in the life of the Church.* So, this article seeks to explore five approaches to catechize the people brought into the faith through baptism and evangelism. The goal is to provide a clear set of practices and methods that teach the faith in an enduring way. While my article addresses children specifically, these practices apply to any age.

1. Give Children (And All People!) Something to Grow into (And Not Out Of)

Apply your heart to instruction and your ear to words of knowledge. Proverbs 23:12

As children mature and grow, they move from certain things of interest to others. One year they’re into a particular cartoon, or book series or superhero, and the next they’re onto something else. In other words, **children grow out of things.** They grow out of shoes, clothes, tastes, what interests them. And when they grow out of things, *they very rarely return back.*

In an effort to engage the child, many of the congregational practices of the past have attempted to be “kid friendly”. While seemingly arbitrary, these practices share certain characteristics. Kid friendly ends up being cartoonish. Cheap. Plastic. Cutsie. Let me give you an example. A few weeks back, when preparing for Good Friday worship, I looked at the “children’s worship supplement” supplied to us by *Concordia Publishing House*. It had a grotesque cartoon picture

of Jesus bearing the cross for the child to color! We might not think too much about this most of the year, but this didn't sit well with me. Are we to reduce Jesus' death on a cross to a cartoon picture, so that it's "kid friendly" and they'll be "engaged"?

Aside from the aesthetic, kids who use resources like this "grow out of them". They stop being interested in coloring pictures or doing word searches. But the deep impression that is made on the child (and the congregation) is that **the faith is something simplistic, cheap and disposable**. One objection commonly made is that, "Children need something that holds their attention". Fair enough. It is important to be age-appropriate. But does that mean there is nothing in the Divine Service, or the sanctuary, or the season of the Church to "hold their attention"? This is not only done for little children. It's done for the youth as well. Then the next level, and so forth. But where does it stop? When does the child, or youth, or young adult become enfolded into the practices of the Church...with everyone else?

The overall impression created in the child's mind is that "church is for kids". And when they're no longer "kids", they look for something else. *What if we gave them something to grow into and not out of?* Consider this example. Children learn to talk, not from cartoons, or videos, or crafts. **They learn from watching and imitating what they see and hear around them every single day.** This is the way we are all "catechized" into our native tongue. So, going to worship, saying daily prayers, doing daily devotions, participating in the liturgy, attending substantial bible classes...*being immersed in the life of the Church grows us into and not out of the Church.*

2. Feed Them with the Word and Sacrament (And Not with Sugary Snacks)

Like newborn infants, long for the pure spiritual milk, that by it you may grow up into salvation—if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good. 1 Peter 2:2-3

Following on the heels of daily catechesis and weekly worship (quantity) is **what we feed our children** (quality). Again, an example from daily life. Most any parent pays careful attention to what their children eat. We make sure that meals are balanced and nutritious. While we might give some variety, more important is *the daily sustenance*. "Drink your milk! Eat your vegetables! Finish your chicken." We know as parents it's our job to ensure that kids get all the daily requirements of minerals and vitamins they need to grow. We feed them that which promotes healthy growth and sustains them.

However, what has often been the approach with catechesis? If anything, *it tends to be superficial and artificial*. Quick and shallow. I know, I know...they're children. You don't give an infant steak or a toddler lobster risotto. But why is it that children's teaching is often the equivalent to a fruit roll-up or a gummy bear? Why is that we insist on watering down every teaching of the faith to the smallest component part? As if catechesis is a sugary snack?

Children have a robust capacity to ingest and soak up their environment in what they see and hear (and taste and smell). Whether they can articulate it or not, children from ages 0-7 retain a

tremendous amount of content. It is after third grade that they begin to ask more complex questions about “why” and “how”. But children retain **what they hear** (bible stories), **what they see** (liturgical colors and the symbols of the paraments), and imitate what they notice others doing around them (**what they do**) from a very early age.

So, how do you “feed” a four year old “word and sacrament”? Teaching them to make the sign of the cross. This is a powerful reminder of their baptism (the connection you make for them), and it is *tactile and sensory*. Teaching prayers and parts of the liturgy that they themselves can say in worship is also impactful. Consider this. Bringing your child to the communion rail is one of the most formative things you can do for them. They see (up close!) the reception of the Sacrament. They smell the wine. They hear the words of the pastor and elder. They even hear the crunch of the wafer. They receive a blessing from the pastor, who puts his hands on their head, hearing the words connecting them to their baptism. They can fold their hands during prayer. Standing up and sitting down when appropriate. All of these things *collectively begin to imprint* on your little one’s soul, psyche, their hearts, hands and minds.

Worship Is the Alpha and Omega of Catechesis

Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him. Colossians 3:16-17

This, of course, presumes that children are a) being brought to worship b) intentionally and actively instructed and corrected while there c) and that these practices and rituals are reinforced at home, in the car, on a walk, etc. But let’s talk about worship specifically in the life of catechesis. I am going to be blunt—WITHOUT REGULAR ATTENDANCE IN WORSHIP, THERE CAN BE NO FAITH FORMATION. This goes for *any person of any age*, by the way. It is such a simple premise that it gets overlooked by so many. Worship is the beginning of it all, from the time we are born.

This becomes a question about what worship is and what it does. Worship is (I’ve written extensively elsewhere) **where God locates Himself that we might receive His gifts**. This begins, not at some arbitrary age when a child is thought to be “accountable”, but from the cradle. Does a child “understand” everything going on? No. Do you? Do I, for that matter? No. *Comprehension is not the key. Total and regular immersion is.* In what? The life of the Church lived out in the Body of Christ, week in, week out.

Worship is also the “end” of catechesis, that is, **the goal of it**. We are trying to form a life-long disciple of Christ. We are actively instructing one who is to continue to receive Christ’s gifts of Word and Sacrament. Catechesis is not a test you pass. It is not a craft project. It is not a hoop to be jumped through. **Catechesis is to better instruct the child into the life of faith, that they**

might grow and mature in Christ. The hope is that they will have children, and instruct them in the faith. By taking them to worship! By having them baptized. By catechizing them.

3. Make Them Experience Belonging (Stop the Segregation!)

The disciples rebuked the people, but Jesus said, “Let the little children come to me and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of heaven.” And he laid his hands on them and went away. Matthew 19:14-15

But as we look throughout American Christianity (even in the LCMS), there is a fundamental difference of opinion and practice over children’s role in worship. Some people want to *remove* them from worship, or offer “children’s church” as an alternative. Children belong in worship, just as much as 94-year-old Grandma Schmidt does. It’s not about “behaving” (though they have to learn to behave), it is about *belonging*. Belonging is experienced through direct engagement in worship practices. From cradle to grave.

As pointed out above, children of a very young age can begin to participate in worship. They can stand and sit. They can fold their hands to pray. They can learn basic responses like “amen” and “also with you”. They can sing parts of the liturgy. So, as early as possible *we should train them to participate*. Every child is different; not all children have the same attention spans. But there are certainly “moments of engagement” that any child can enter into. Through active participation in worship, children feel like they belong, that they have a role, and that worship is a place for them to be, not be taken out of until “they are older and understand better”.

This doesn’t mean that this is easy! It means that parents and grandparents have to model the behavior, actively teach and correct, and even put them in a position to see. Consistency is the key, and it doesn’t happen overnight. The goal is that they begin to feel like they are part of something and not a visitor in “adult things”.

4. Parents Must Make Better Choices and Have New/Different Priorities

Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord. Ephesians 6:4

Train up a child in the way he should go; even when he is old he will not depart from it. Proverbs 22:6

Finally, the responsibility for lasting catechesis comes down to parents. The pastor has very little direct impact on children. The parents are the ones who make the difference. Even more specifically, studies have shown that **the critical figure in long term catechesis is the father**. It is the head of the household who will make the most enduring impression . In one well-known study, it was shown that the highest percentage of children who stayed in the faith was in *a household where the father sang in worship!* Tragically, many fathers are not only absent from worship, but even absent from the household. There are many “broken” families into which

others have to step up. I personally was raised in that situation. However, despite the breakdown of the family, the ideal model is not negated. The point is that a mother and father who a) bring their children to worship every Sunday and b) model the faith at home through prayer and intentional devotional time and then c) actively participate themselves in worship *do more to teach their children than any program, activity, or congregational event ever could*. It is in fact, the way God designed humans to learn...through mom and dad, over time through repetition.

It comes down to parents **making better choices**. As I have written elsewhere, a family that eats together, prays together. A family that eats and prays together, worships together. But how often does the busyness of life...all the school activities, social events, sports, etc. get in the way of simply sitting down together to have a meal? If you have children at home (of any age), how many times a week are you eating a meal at the same time, at the same table (without a screen involved)? If it's less than five, then **better decisions need to be made**. If this seems like I am being intrusive, well...then yeah! I'm your pastor! Pastors get into people's business. It's called spiritual instruction. I am attempting to catechize **you**! It's my job and calling. What you do with it is your choice.

Maybe you would like to make some changes, but are overwhelmed by where to start. Maybe you are doing some things suggested but don't see the possibility of doing more than you already are. The basic questions that you must ask yourself—*what is your priority for your family and children or grandchildren? What is your greatest hope for them? Who do you want them to become? What do you want their heart to fix upon for a lifetime?* If the answer to any of those questions is a life-long active participant in the Kingdom of God, *then tough choices have to be made*. Actions have to be taken, like, NOW. It's not too late, though...it's never too late. So, maybe you start small and simple. Try to eat dinner together two nights a week. Have a special family prayer time once a week. Invite dad to read the bible at devotion. And maybe, we can say "no" to doing everything everyone else does, and have better priorities.

A Catechesis That Lasts for a Lifetime

For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it. Hebrews 12:11

In the end, catechesis that lasts is predicated on *boring consistency*. Doing the same things over and over and over...until it *bore*s into hands, hearts and creates habits. It's not exciting. It often seems pointless. We must refrain from our sinful urge to make every single thing "entertaining" and instead seek the things that are edifying and grounded in the truth and beauty of God. So, it's day in, day out. It's even when you don't feel like it. What begins to happen, though, is that *God's Word and Spirit changes hearts and minds*. He forms and shapes and molds and fashions. He gives us many ways to receive what He has to give. We just have to be willing recipients. We put ourselves in the best possible position to have direct contact with His gifts. Touch holy things. Read and even memorize His Word. Pray the prayer He has given us daily. Hang around

with others that want the same things. Talk to your pastor. Ask for forgiveness and try again. For these are important things, indeed eternal things.

I write this because nearly everyone I interact with, even in my own congregation, hold contrary views to the above suggestions. Instead, the sentimental urge is (always it seems!) pulling at us to reprimand and retry everything that has failed us in the past. “If we do it better this time, then we’ll get the kids, and the families...” Folks, I have been around the proverbial block. I have seen what works and what doesn’t. I have made loads of mistakes and learned from them. I have sought out others who did it well, and asked them, “How did you all do it?” I have studied and read and contemplated and listened and tweaked and tested. I have learned from my own upbringing what didn’t work and am bold enough to say, “Let’s try another way!” Do I think I know better? Frankly, yes. Yes I do. I say this not out of arrogance but a belief that there is a still more excellent approach. God has called me to this place to help these people, families, children. I care deeply about the people that I serve.

A catechesis that lasts is not about doing something new or innovative or exciting. It is actually getting back to how the Church has taught for nearly 2000 years. Through instruction in the Word, through worship, in the context of the family. I propose we go back...not to the past of the 20th century, but to the core principles and approaches that make enduring disciples for life. It is this way that we will keep people in the Church, by growing them into it, that they may be formed and shaped by Christ.