

Becoming a Catechist

YOU'RE becoming a Catechist! Well, God bless you. These ideas, written long ago for “Scripture teachers” in government schools, are easily adapted to the home, parish Sunday school or Catholic school.

Learn pupils' names as quickly as you can. It's friendly and it gives you a disciplinary advantage.

Over a period of weeks, and **very discreetly**, try to get a picture of their home-life — it might be anything from awful to awesome. **Do not ask impertinent questions:** Is there a Dad at home? Does Mum go out to work? What siblings are there and where does your pupil come in the family? Who's sick? etc.

Try to gauge **their present level of faith, hope and charity.** Are they children of God and of the Church by Baptism; or are they simply pagan “men of goodwill”; or children of modernity seemingly overdosed with original sin and worldly emptiness? Baptized children have sanctifying grace which will be activated by doctrinal instruction. However, this is not always discernible due to other factors, and besides, the non-baptized children may be receiving actual graces as they listen to you.

The children might not even know if they are baptized. Be tactful about finding out. Some catechists report classes in which less than 50% are baptized, but their parents list them as Catholics.

Do they go to **Mass?** Perhaps 5%? What about Christmas and Easter? Don't let it get you down — a Catholic school might not be much better...

Do they **pray?** Catechists aim to get them to **pray daily and to keep the Ten Commandments.** Aim for both Morning and Night Prayers — tell them that brief prayers are a lot better than no prayers. See the metrical morning offering in the *Catholic Family Catechism Heart Speaks to Heart* n. 13.

The state of their souls does concern you because it concerns our Divine Master: here is a prayer for Catechists (or put “Readers” in for Readers at Mass):

FATHER, by Thine Incarnate Word Jesus Christ
Thou hast revealed Thyself to us,
and Thou fashionest us in His image
by the Holy Spirit in our hearts.
Give to Thy catechist a faith strengthened
by the meditation on the Holy Scripture,
a hope enriched by mastering the art of teaching,
and a charity imitating that of the Blessed Virgin Mary,
who bore Thy Word with love beyond all telling,
and dared to teach Him after a human fashion.
May Thy catechist have a portion
in the Heavenly inheritance with all those
who have faithfully ministered
the Word of God from the beginning,
through Christ our Lord. Amen.

TEACHER'S BOOK & PUPILS' TEXTS

You'll need to prepare your work from a Teacher's Manual and/or a pupil's text. Some wonderful materials are available so discard any trendy rubbish.

If you used a Teacher's Manual from the *Faith &*

Life Series, there is a pupil's text for each grade, but they're expensive. A compromise is to get the Parish to pay for the **pupil's activity book**, which is cheaper, and to ask parents to buy the matching text. That means some (many?) pupils will not have a text, only an activity book. This is a workable scheme.

HELPFUL HINTS

CONTENT: Resist your devotional zeal of starting with the Mass and the Sacraments, because:-

1. These may be remote from the pupils' experience;
2. **Credal foundations come first;** God, man, sin; then,
3. The Ten Commandments which are so teachable, interesting and practicable.

LESSON PLANNING: Plan a **Beginning**, a **Middle** and an **End** (a conclusion). See next page.

OPENING PRAYER: Do not quell hubbub with the Sign of the Cross. Begin with “**Standing, Still and Silent**, then the **Sign of the Cross.**” Next the *Our Father* and *Hail, Mary*. Later on, check their wording (get them to write it down): beware of “who *aren't*”, “who *aunt*”, “*hello* be thy name”.

A STORY seizes their interest: everyone loves a story, even if only a brief two minutes.

TELL THEM what they need to know — talking teaches, but needs enriching (like bare bread or plain cake).

TELL, REPEAT, REVISE, TEST: be interesting all the time and when revising, do it a bit differently by giving a new look to the familiar things.

USE QUESTIONS to hold the attention of their minds so that they **Listen/Think/Learn.**

QUIZZES are exciting for children. They love beating each other and it channels their egotism into productive mental effort; (bless/blast those educational psychologists who hate competition). Quizzes also reveal their areas of confusion and ignorance

INSIST on the basic discipline & courtesy of “Answer properly when you're spoken to” and “Do what you're told at once,” (cf. ABC of Camping n. 38 in *Bush Boys*, and insist they put up their hand and wait till called before speaking. You can remind them that when *they* are in charge of younger children, *they* expect obedience. The school's discipline or lack of it will help or hinder you. Don't give up if some days your classes are a re-run of St Stephen's martyrdom...

LESSON CONCLUSION:

Write something (not a lot). State primary schools used supply exercise books. If so, make sure they're used every lesson to justify your request.

Draw a picture or diagram copied from whiteboard or display..

Chant a Bible text, prayer, catechism formula (use *Catholic Family Catechism, Heart Speaks to Heart*).

Timing the end of a lesson is often impossible, so try to have an activity that is tolerant of being cut short.

HOMEWORK

Reward homework with a holy card, a lolly(!) etc — even adults respond to multi-valued motivation.

More Techniques

LIKE FOOD, knowledge needs digestion. Get the pupils to roll the new ideas around in their minds (like gastric juices!); criss-cross the same 'country' from other directions. There must be **revision** of what has been taught — like a cow chewing its cud! Also, like food, **ideas which feed the mind need variety**, so the mental diet must involve the introduction of foods never tasted before, yet not so new that it will not mix with what went before: new knowledge builds on old; therefore we proceed from what is already known to what is so far unknown.

Our souls, of which the **intellect** and **will** are the highest powers (or faculties), are in contact with the world and other people's souls **through our five bodily senses**: therefore, good teaching involves as many senses as possible, especially hearing, seeing, speaking (singing) and touching. Touching includes activities like writing, drawing and acting.

This is why teachers need a variety of **gimmicks** (=techniques), and some **equipment** (=teaching aids: home-made are best — pupils appreciate the effort you make on their behalf).

Our Supreme Teacher is the Lord Jesus. He is also **our message**. So we turn to Him, to learn both our message and our techniques. Everything else is linked to Him: all the details of the Church's teaching, all the good example of morality we get from others, all our sources of inspiration. "Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus;" Philippians 2:5.

PLAN A BEGINNING, MIDDLE, END

The beginning (MOTIVATION step) must seize the pupils' attention: a picture, a story or even something that happened just before the class. It must grab their interest and lead on into the Presentation.

The middle, or bulk, of the lesson must furnish their minds with new knowledge or new understanding of the familiar: this is called the PRESENTATION step(s).

The end must leave them with some complete idea, something to take away with them. This is called the APPLICATION step, making it real and practical.

What is first in intention is last in execution. The application step must summarize the topic; the presentation step(s) must climax in the application; the motivation step must be appropriate to lead in to the presentation step(s). In other words, plan backwards!

Thus the application step is sometimes called the **attitude or conduct aim** of the lesson, in contrast to the detailed **knowledge aim** of the presentation.

The application might involve the pupils in writing, drawing, singing or chanting, to **instill** the topic. These are richer variants of straight out repetition.

Beware lest an attitude/conduct aim turn the lesson into a sermon — teaching is not preaching (but preaching is always teaching). Attitude Aims are directed more at the will, e.g. to improve in a virtue, or welcome a new **idea** or a new **conviction** for the mind and thereby remotely a new **ideal** for the will.

ENDING THE LESSON

It is hard to time the end of a lesson so that pupils are fully occupied all the time and you have not left out things you meant to do. It is frustrating to have some of your carefully prepared lesson cut short by the bell, with the resulting collapse of class interest. In some schools, the bell is the signal for pandemonium.

The only way to avoid this problem (especially in high schools) where even if your watch is right, the bell never seems to go to time on the "Scripture period" is to get the bulk of your class over early, in the first half or two-thirds of the allotted time. Have any written work well under way before the end, and be able to taper off gracefully.

Have some extra work ready which you can assign to those who finish more quickly. Label it "Faster Workers" and assign it to the others as homework (even if your experience tells you that there is not much hope of it being done).

If you finish too early, you can always call the class to order, "pens down", "all eyes to me", and wait commandingly till they obey. Then begin to talk on some further considerations.

There is no obvious way of dealing with those who do not even get down the basic blackboard summary. It can be suggested that they borrow a friend's book and finish it at home. But then they might not bring either book back next week... Be chary with calling in or phoning or writing to the parents...

CLOSING PRAYER

There is a similar problem with the Closing Prayer. It is nearly impossible to get the proper atmosphere once the bell has gone. The noises in the corridor and strange faces looking in the windows and doors, quite apart from the shuffling of feet and bags, means you have lost them. Rather than risk irreverence with prayer, simply call them to order and, with everyone standing quietly, ask all to make the Sign of the Cross with the words. Then, finish with "Good morning."

This is why it is best to have the main prayers at the beginning, and it is worth going to some trouble to do them properly. Do not use praying to call the class to order. Rather, get them ready first.

Another idea is to have the concluding prayer towards the end of the lesson and then continue with writing or talking until the bell.

UNRULY YOUNGSTERS

"Behaviour is purposive." Some annoying behaviour is only good natured mischief, without malice, yet fulfils a **need**. Try to fulfil the need in a more profitable way.

The urge to show off, to be the centre of attention, can be 'sublimated' in having such pupils perform special tasks like cleaning off a display/whiteboard, reading aloud or simply answering a question.

Sending them out of the room is a last resort but better than having the lesson ruined for the others.