

# Fostering Faith Catechist Formation Insert

## Catechesis: 1 hour



Completion of this study entitles the catechist to one hour of credit toward certification.

## CATECHESIS: FAITH AND HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

### THEMES

- Introduction to psychological, personal and faith development
- Method of catechizing according to faith development

### CATECHIST COMPETENCIES

As a result of this study, catechists will be able to:

1. Identify the various stages and characteristics of personal development and personality types, and how faith development is related to them.
2. Discern areas for further reflection in their own faith development.
3. Articulate the implications for teaching methods based on the characteristics of various stages of development.

### CATECHISM REFERENCES #50-100

#### FOCUSING THE STUDY

Personal development, personality type and environment profoundly influence a person's faith development. Understanding the process of development is an essential skill for catechesis. Catechists can work more effectively when they have a clear perception of the life situation in which catechesis takes place.

#### INTRODUCTION

Catechesis proclaims and teaches God's Word so believers may grow in faith. As the National Catholic Directory recognizes, the purpose of catechesis is to make a person's "faith become living, conscious, and active, through the light of instruction using whatever methods are necessary to achieve this goal." (NCD #32) Because every person – child, adolescent, or adult – comes to catechesis already with faith, even if only a minimal amount, catechists take the initial faith of their students, enrich it, and help it grow.

Faith is first, and foremost, a gift from God. It cannot be earned, merited, or manufactured. God reveals Himself to people by gradually communicating the mystery, his plan of loving goodness. Faith grows and matures in the same way that people grow and mature, although faith does not necessarily grow and mature at the same pace as physical or moral maturity.

As a catechist, you are called to know and understand something of the particular stage of religious development of your students and use the appropriate teaching method best suited to their needs. Here are some basic characteristics and suggestions for several developmental levels. Use this list as a basic framework for putting together an age-appropriate course of study in your particular specialty of catechesis.

#### MEETING PEOPLE WHERE THEY ARE

The material below is based on the work of James Fowler as it is described in the LEAD book *Faith Passages and Patterns* by Thomas A. Droegge (Fortress Press, Philadelphia, 1983).

#### Stage 1: God Is Like Mommy and Daddy

Students in the approximate age range of 2 to 6 years develop a basic sense of trust. They rely on those who provide, care, love, and nurture. They identify God as a caring, loving parent who protects and nurtures. The child's view of the world is based on very direct and personal experiences. They retain a sense of wonder, are very open, loving and eager to please. God can be experienced at all times through all the wonders of the senses and creation. Some effective techniques include role-playing Bible stories, miming the message of a song with hand and body motions, and prayer experiences that utilize the senses and nature.

#### Factors which affect an expression of faith:

1. Remember random segments of stories.
2. Cannot always distinguish fact from fantasy.
3. Lack abstract reasoning skills.
4. Are fragile and have limits.
5. View God as a friend to be talked to.
6. Learn best through actions of others (more so than words.)

#### Implications for leaders:

1. Tell simple, single-focus stories.
2. Listen carefully to detect points of confusion.
3. Don't teach abstract ideas that will be misunderstood and will need to be unlearned later.



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4. Know and respect their abilities and limits.
5. Don't take advantage of their trust by over-teaching.
6. Seek opportunities for spontaneous free prayer to God.
7. Exemplify God's love and acceptance.

### Stage 2: What's Fair Is Fair

Students of 7 to 12 years are approaching preadolescence when physical changes often make it difficult for them to come to terms with their emerging sexuality. At this stage the peer group exerts a much greater influence. Personal freedom and the responsibilities and consequences of decision-making, along with a keen sense of justice, are other important issues to consider when working with this age group. They are attracted by simple stories, but their understanding is literal and often limited to seeing only good or evil, justice or fairness. Their faith is often expressed as good people receiving blessings and bad people being punished.

#### Factors which affect this expression of faith:

1. Tend to seek justice and revenge (Old Testament stories are popular).
2. Attracted by law more than gospel.
3. Lack the ability to reflect on the spiritual meanings of stories; tend to understand only the literal story line.
4. Look to others as models of Christian behavior.
5. Have a need to belong.
6. Tend to focus on God as a loving Father for their own personal lives.
7. Are growing in awareness of the purpose of Jesus' life.



#### Implication for leaders:

1. Tell stories that present a positive image of God's action.
2. Present carefully concepts like forgiveness, stewardship, and concern for others who are not present.
3. Choose stories that have clear messages; avoid adding moralisms.
4. Tell stories about and invite people to class who do exemplary acts.
5. Involve them with many people of the parish.
6. Provide opportunities for prayer, private devotions, and worship.
7. Teach carefully the distinction between God and Jesus.

### Stage 3: I Believe What the Church Believes

Early adolescents remain very peer oriented and are very sensitive to what others think of them. In spite of their self-doubts and the external pressures associated with this age, these students usually develop a new spiritual outlook on life in general, on themselves, and on those around them. This growing faith awareness leads these students to a greater ability to love and to a more mature faith. Catechists do well when they stress the excitement of this age, rather than its obvious pitfalls.

The difficulty for a catechist working with these students is that the students are likely to ignore a great part of what any adult says to them. They prefer to explore answers to serious and less serious problems on their own. This individuality needs to be respected. These students are more impressed by example than they are by words. The more they can be involved in hands-on activities, the greater will be their interest in faith issues.

#### Factors which affect this expression of faith:

1. Can begin to think abstractly.
2. Desire organized patterns of thinking.
3. Have a quest for religious knowledge.
4. Can articulate what they've been taught, but are not able to develop their own point of view.
5. Need acceptance and self-esteem.
6. Look for identity from others; peers are important.
7. Are easily indoctrinated.



#### Implications for leaders:

1. Encourage their developing ability to question and think for themselves.
2. Provide increasingly complex ideas to fit their expanding world.
3. Recognize their growing understanding of God as a personal friend and advisor.
4. Help them feel good about what they know. Use factual information and encourage expression of opinions.
5. Give special attention to relationship building. Use group-oriented teaching styles such as teamwork and projects.
6. Express your own Christian witness and faith experiences. Help them see the faith experiences of other Christians.

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## Stage 4: As I See It, God Is . . .

Older teens are attempting to formulate their own direction and purpose and are usually interested in what adults have to say. There is a common misconception that youth of this age are not interested in religious or spiritual topics. Because of this error, lessons often focus exclusively on topics of self-esteem, dating, and sexuality. However, studies show that these students are most interested in learning and sharing about the crucial life and death issues that make up the deepest parts of a human being's faith experiences. This age group is very concerned for others and is willing to work on worthwhile service projects. They are also responsive to personal witness stories and look for opportunities to build relationships. Providing service opportunities followed by a systematic debriefing can be a powerful occasion for them. You can use journal writing, opportunities for reflective, personal prayer, and group retreats as effective tools to reach students of this age.

### Factors which affect this expression of faith:

1. Establish a personal identity.
2. Seek independence.
3. Trust their own intellectual ability.
4. Are concerned about individuality.
5. Like to debate or argue points of conviction.
6. Are confronted by conflicting authorities.
7. Engage in objective reflection.



### Implications for leaders:

1. Recognize that traditional values and ideas may be rejected.
2. Encourage their personal reflective thinking.
3. Listen to the challenges, questions, and ideas which come in searching for a personal expression of faith.
4. Affirm, accept, and support them as individuals.
5. Use group processes which encourage personal reflection, challenging and questioning one another, comparing and contrasting information, and sharing ideas.
6. Help them think about their faith and sort through the various messages they receive.
7. Present a wide range of topics and issues, and encourage dialogue.
8. Express your own Christian witness in open and nonjudgmental ways.

## Stage 5: More Than Just Words

Adults are concerned about dialogue. They are open to new ways of looking at things and to seeing other viewpoints. They search for deeper meanings in their lives. Their understanding of their religious beliefs and of God is part of their search.

### Factors which affect this expression of faith:

1. Seek interchange with others.
2. Have confidence in own positions and convictions.
3. Are nonjudgmental.
4. Search for meanings and revelation in such things as symbols, rituals, and life experiences.
5. Can compare and contrast experiences.



### Implications for leaders:

1. Be prepared for questions which explore the paradoxes and tensions of faith.
2. Encourage reflective sharing of personal faith-life stories, including defeats and commitments.
3. Encourage "critical" questions about inherited traditions, symbols of faith, etc.
4. Invite struggle with mid-life issues of shattered dreams, limits and possibilities of vocation.
5. Affirm dialogical encounter with issues of ministry in the world.
6. Provide opportunities for self-directed learning and affirmation of searching.
7. Involve learners in selecting curriculum based on their expressed needs.
8. Affirm and encourage participants to take leadership roles.

### A Story from Scripture and the Five Stages

Read the story of God putting Abraham to the test (Genesis 22:1-18). Keeping in mind the five stages of faith development, try to imagine how people in each stage might understand and interpret the story of Abraham and Isaac. Children in stage one, innocently relying on those who provide, care, love and nurture, might focus on Isaac's trust in his father rather than any sense of danger. This is a problematic story for those in this stage. Youngsters in stage two, literal interpreters as they are, are often limited to seeing only good and evil, justness and fairness. Their faith is often expressed as good people receiving blessings and bad people being punished. Regarding Abraham and Isaac, they might view God rewarding Abraham by telling him to "stop" because he obeyed the first command to prepare Isaac as a sacrifice. Early adolescents in stage three rely on authorities for what they believe. There is little critical examination of beliefs. Their widening contacts begin to expose them to conflicting authorities, but their beliefs and understandings of God are as the church teaches. Similar to those in stage two, they might view God's command to "stop" as a reward that Abraham earned because he obeyed the first command to prepare Isaac as a sacrifice. Older teens in stage four become more independent in their thinking. They weigh the alternatives and take a personal stand. Individual reflection and thinking help them sort

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out conflicting viewpoints in order to form their own. Beliefs and understandings of God are very personal. They might view Abraham torn between sacrificing Isaac and his religious understanding of the sanctity of life. Adults in stage five are concerned about dialogue. They are open to new ways of looking at things and to seeing other viewpoints. They search for deeper meanings in their lives. Their understanding of their religious beliefs and of God is part of their search. They might view the story as a means to explore deep cosmic, moral and religious questions.

### **CONCLUSION**

Where adults believe because they have discovered personal reasons for belief, children accept the gift of faith by observing and imitating the adult models in their lives. Parents, relatives, and teachers tell children what to believe, but it is their example that makes the strongest impact, because children learn about faith primarily through observation. Between childhood and adulthood, people begin to discover that the reasons to believe, which they embraced as children, may no longer seem compelling. The adolescent may not yet have found personal reasons for believing, and so may rebel against, question, or double what they have been taught. This is all part of the process leading to adult faith.

### **REVIEW/DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

In order to complete this study and earn one hour of credit toward catechist certification, you must respond to the reflection/discussion questions in either of the following ways:

1. Write/type your responses (20-40 words each) and submit them to your catechetical leader;
2. Engage in a formal discussion of the questions (at least 30 minutes) in some forum approved by your catechetical leader (e.g. a catechist meeting, level meetings, team meetings, catechist pairings, etc).

### **Review Questions**

1. **What is meant by the phrase “faith grows and matures in the same way that people grow and mature?”**
2. Summarize/describe the characteristics of faith at each of the following stages:
  - God is like mommy and daddy
  - What’s fair is fair
  - I believe what the Church believes
  - As I see it, God is...
  - More than just words
3. **What are the implications for catechists of each stage?**
4. Summarize how people in each stage might interpret the story of Abraham (Gn 22:1-18)

### **Practical Applications/ Critical Thinking**

1. Why is it important to understand that faith is developmental?
2. As a catechist, how do you create an environment where faith can grow?
3. What are concrete signs of a “living, conscious, and active faith?”
4. Define “mature faith.”
5. How will your students be influenced by your faith?
6. List some general characteristics about the students you teach. Describe two or three specific approaches for helping them to grow in faith.
7. What are some creative ways a parish community can support a parent’s attempt to hand on the faith?

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