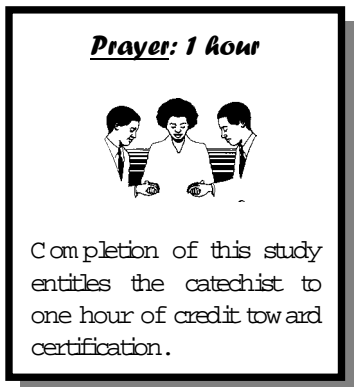


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The Catechist as a Person of Prayer and a Leader of Prayer



Theme

The prayerful catechist, forms of prayer, skills for prayer experiences, the qualities of the prayerful person

Catechist Competencies

As a result of this study, the catechist will be able to

1. Articulate the relationship between personal prayer and catechetical ministry.
2. Evidence an ability to fulfill the role of catechist as a leader of prayer.
3. Demonstrate an ability to teach at least two age-appropriate skills for prayer.
4. Model to others the importance and the benefits of being a prayerful person.
5. Demonstrate an age-appropriate prayer for a seasonal feast.

Catechism References

#2559–2565, 2626–2643

Focusing the Study

Catechesis for prayer is experiential more than it is didactic. The catechist is the model of prayer and the leader of prayer in the classroom.

Introduction

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* tells us: “Those who with God’s help have welcomed Christ’s call and freely responded to it are urged on by love of Christ to proclaim the Good News everywhere in the world. This treasure, received from the apostles, has been faithfully guarded by their succes-

sors. All Christ’s faithful are called to hand it on from generation to generation, by professing the faith, by living it in fraternal sharing, and by celebrating it in liturgy and prayer” (#3). Certainly, this vocation of Christians is all the more true of catechists. Note that this statement from the Catechism addresses all the tasks of catechesis and urges that all members of the community participate in these tasks: message (*profess*), community (*fraternal*), worship (*celebrate*), and service (*share*).

Prayer and Ministry

So the catechist is called to live fully the Christian vocation. And why is that? What is the goal of catechesis? *On Catechesis in Our Time (Catechesi Tradendae)* tells us: “. . . at the heart of catechesis we find, in essence, a Person, the Person of Jesus . . .” (#5). The goal is communion; the catechist, in union with Jesus, cooperates with him in drawing all things to him—in this case, the children with whom the catechist works. Prayer nourishes the growth of the necessary communion between the catechist and Jesus. How else can we say with John, “My teaching is not mine, but his who sent me” (John 7:16)?

Leaders of Prayer

Leaders of prayer must first of all be prayerful persons. However, pretending to be holy people doesn’t work. Children can sense a catechist’s relationship or lack of relationship with the Lord. There’s no faking it! On the other hand, for sincerely prayerful leaders of prayer, this is not the time to hide our talents under a basket.

The first task of leaders of prayer is to plan the prayer experience, often with the assistance of several participants—the catechist with children in the class, for example. Begin with a theme for the prayer experience. Frequently the theme will be determined by the feast or the content of a lesson or unit. Some connection with the needs or cares of the children can be helpful. For example, the feast of St. Patrick might be celebrated with a prayer experience that emphasizes the missionary call of all Christians, even the children in this class.

Deciding the place of prayer belongs to the leader, or the planning group assisting the leader. The prayer space should be comfortable and conducive to reverent prayer. Consider using the nearby church for some prayer experiences. If there is a prayer space in the classroom, make sure there is sufficient room to gather without crowding. When children are too close physically, the temptation to nudge or to whisper can be just too great. Children might sit on classroom chairs or car-

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peted space (sometimes useful for a meditative prayer) or even stand for a short prayer. Kneeling is best if there are kneelers. Check on activities planned for nearby rooms; if the noise level is going to be distracting, move to a quieter space.

Select readers who are proficient, and practice with them. If a child will be the prayer leader, be sure he or she is confident and well-prepared. Duplicate any prayer sheets necessary and provide hymnals for the children. Use the parish hymnals — if possible, a children’s hymnal. Be aware of copyright laws, and do not duplicate music on the prayer sheets unless the parish has permission from the publisher to do so. If a video or tape or CD will be used in the prayer experience, test the equipment ahead of time. Nothing throws off a prayerful setting faster than an audiovisual flub.

Carry the Bible in procession or enthrone it in a place of honor. Plan for some quiet time during the prayer. This might be between two readings or before or after a prayer. Also plan some kind of gesture or actions with a song or the Lord’s Prayer, a sign of peace, hands extended in blessing, and so on.

Prayer Skills

According to the Catechism, there are five forms of prayer: blessing and adoration, praise, thanksgiving, petition, and intercession. All of these prayer forms, at one time or another, can be incorporated into prayer experiences. The psalms are one way to include some of these prayer forms. Of course, intercessions are easy to include in a prayer experience; the general intercessions at Mass are an example of these.

In the prayer of blessing, we respond to God and his gifts, and we implore God to continue to bless us with his many gifts. Blessing is so closely connected with adoration that they are grouped together in the Catechism. In adoration, we worship God who is all-powerful and all-loving. Praise is similar to blessing and adoration. Again, our attention is on God. We give him glory just because he is God. It’s not because of something God has done for us; it’s just because God is God.

Petition is asking God for the things we need. We pray for the coming of God’s kingdom in its fullness. And we ask God for forgiveness—contrition. Intercession is prayer for others. We intercede with God on behalf of the world and the Church. We pray for others in the parish and people we know who are ill or dying or who are in need in some other way.

Thanksgiving is the other side of petition and intercession. Instead of asking God for something, we thank him with our minds and hearts and bodies. The Eucharist is the Church’s great prayer of thanksgiving.

The Psalms and the Forms of Prayer

Blessing and Adoration

Come, bless the LORD, all you servants of the LORD,
who stand by night in the house of the LORD!

Psalm 134:1

Praise

Praise the LORD!

Praise the LORD, O my soul!

I will praise the LORD as long as I live;

I will sing praises to my God all my life long.

Psalm 146:1–2

Petition

Deliver me, O LORD, from evildoers;
protect me from those who are violent.

Psalm 140:1

Have mercy on me, O God,
according to your steadfast love;
according to your abundant mercy
blot out my transgressions.

Psalm 51:1

Intercession

Rise up, O LORD; O God, lift up your hand;
do not forget the oppressed.

Psalm 10:12

Thanksgiving

O give thanks to the LORD, for he is good,
for his steadfast love endures forever;
Who alone does great wonders,
for his steadfast love endures forever. . . .

Psalm 136:3–4

Scripture passages taken from the New Revised Standard Version.

Format

A prayer experience needs to follow a format. The format can be quite flexible, but the two most common formats are the Liturgy of the Word and the Liturgy of the Hours. Not all the elements listed in each of the outlines presented here need to be included. However, using one of these formats as a framework can help make planning simple. Of course, the time available will determine how many of the elements to include.

The Liturgy of the Word format is based on the first part of the Mass, adding the Lord’s Prayer and a closing song. The Liturgy of the Hours format is based on the Divine Office

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prayed by priests, religious, and many laity. The format presented here is an adaptation.

Sometimes an entire class can be devoted to a more developed prayer. The Scripture reading or readings can be taken from a chapter's content, and the reflection can be based on or taken directly from the text content. Even an audiovisual and the text activities can be included in the prayer experience to break up the time, especially for younger children.

Possible Formats for Prayer with Children

Liturgy of the Word

Opening song

Greeting

Opening prayer

First reading: Old Testament

Psalm response: sung

Second reading: New Testament letters

Alleluia verse: sung

Gospel reading

Reflection: silent or shared by leader

Intercessions

Lord's Prayer

Sign of peace

Closing song

Liturgy of the Hours (Adaptation)

Greeting

Opening song

An antiphon (usually a psalm verse) can be prayed or sung before and after each psalm and canticle.

Psalm (sides 1 and 2)

Prayer

Psalm—seasonal (sides 1 and 2)

Prayer

Scripture Reading

Psalm response

Canticle of Zechariah (Luke 1:68–69, morning) or Magnificat (Luke 1:46–55, evening [afternoon]) (sides 1 and 2)

Intercessions

Lord's Prayer

Blessing

Sign of peace

Closing song

Being Persons of Prayer

When we pray, we connect with God, the God in whom “we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28). In prayer, we listen to and talk with God. We pray when we are alone and when we gather in community; we pray with words and without words. We turn our minds and hearts to God.

In the Catechism, three parables of Jesus are mentioned regarding prayer (see #2613). The first is the parable of the persevering friend (see Luke 11:5–13). Needing food for a visitor, the man goes to a friend in the middle of the night and begs for bread. Of course, the man he begs from is not about to climb over his children in their bedrolls to give his friend bread. But the friend in need persists until the neighbor gives him what he wants—just to get rid of him and get some sleep. Do we approach God with such persistence? That's what Jesus tells us to do: “Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened.” (Luke 11:9–10).

The second parable is about the importunate widow who prays unceasingly and with the patience only faith can bring (Luke 18:1–8). The widow looks for justice from a judge who is usually not concerned in the least about those who come before him. According to Jesus, he “neither feared God nor had respect for people.” But this judge gives the widow the justice she seeks simply because she keeps coming back. Jesus attributes the woman's boldness and persistence to her faith. And he promises that God will “grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night.”

Finally the Catechism notes the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector (Luke 18:9–14). The point of the parable is the humility of the heart in prayer. The Pharisee in Jesus' story is proud and looks down his nose at the “thieves, rogues, adulterers, and . . . this tax collector.” But this tax collector, from far back in the temple, bows before God and asks for mercy. And it is he whom Jesus praises for approaching God with a humble heart rather than a boastful show.

So we too are called to pray with perseverance, patient faith, and a humble heart. When praying with the children in our care, keep these qualities in mind, and help them learn the practice of these essential qualities. It's fine and necessary to praise the children for their good work, but in prayer lead them to praise and thank God for the gifts that make it possible for them to do their best.

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Putting It Together

In planning a prayer experience, rely on the Lectionary. If the season being celebrated is Easter, look through the Lectionary or the children's Lectionary (or the missalette) for appropriate readings and psalm responses or psalms. Then decide on the format and choose readings and psalms for the Easter Season. If the theme is more defined—for example: Like the women at the tomb, we are called to believe in the Risen Lord and to share the good news—be sure the readings and psalms play off of that theme.

Look for music that is age-appropriate and compatible with the theme. Note if any of the readings can be paired with or psalms replaced by a song. Most hymnals have an index that categorizes the songs according to season or feast and theme. If the children can do gestures for any of the songs, practice ahead of time so that they can sing the song, or at least the refrain, by heart while using the prayerful gestures.

If you will be giving a reflection, plan to involve the children in a dialogue or some other response, such as a drawing or a journal entry or a shared discussion in small groups. Work with the children or a group of children to write intercessions. Include any special needs of the children.

Conclusion

Be enthusiastic! Each prayer experience is an adventure in which you lead the children to deepen their relationship with God. You provide them with a positive opportunity to talk with and listen to the Lord, who loves them without end.

Review – Discussion Questions

In order to complete this study, please 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 in some forum approved by your catechetical leader; e.g. a catechist meeting, level meetings, catechist pairings, etc.

Review Questions

1. How does prayer help a catechist achieve the goal of catechesis?
2. In determining a theme for a prayer experience, what factors should be considered?
3. What practical planning tasks need to be done in order to create a smooth-flowing prayer experience?

4. According to the Catechism, what are the five forms of prayer?
5. What are two commonly used formats for prayer?
6. What parables of Jesus address the topic of prayer? What qualities of prayer are portrayed in these parables?
7. How can the Lectionary help the prayer leader plan a prayer experience?
8. What prayerful gestures might be used in prayer experiences with children?

Practical Application/Critical Thinking

1. When have you experienced good prayer (outside of the sacraments) in a community setting? What made it so?
2. How has your understanding of prayer in the classroom changed through this reflection?
3. How can you enrich your classroom prayer experiences by the application of what you learned in this study?
4. What further study would help you improve the quality of prayer in your classroom?

About the author

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