

## FORMATION OF LAY CATECHISTS: A PATH TO TRANSFORMATION

## Introduction:

Catechesis is an ecclesial act playing a pivotal role in the Church's pastoral activity and is therefore, a significant element in all that the Church does to hand on the faith<sup>1</sup>. Pope Paul VI in his apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi* says, "it is necessary above all to prepare good instructors - parochial catechists, teachers, parents - who are desirous of perfecting themselves in this superior art, which is indispensable and requires religious instruction"<sup>2</sup>. Among other goals, the Church itself is a goal of catechesis; the Church finds a strengthening of her internal life as a community of believers, and her external activity as a missionary church when she gives priority to catechesis over other church-based activities <sup>3</sup>.

The goal of good catechists should be to ensure that the people entrusted to them for faith formation, become true disciples of Jesus Christ bearing fruit in the communities of faith. However, the challenge is to find and form good catechists who are competent and confident to embark on this mission. Very few catechists are able to afford a graduate degree in theology, catechesis or similar religious studies that will equip them with theological education and an adult understanding of the faith. Michael Horan, who trains lay ministers for leadership roles in the church, "teacher confidence is nurtured from a sense of belonging to a group whose members have a forum and support for pursuing their own faith questions, concerns and struggles. Nuns and brothers enjoyed that kind of guild and its benefits, he noted. But the shape and structure of a guild that will give catechists and religion teachers a sense of identity and confidence has yet to be

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<sup>1</sup> United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *National Directory for Catechesis*, 1st ed. (Washington, D.C: USCCB Publishing, 2005), 56

<sup>2</sup> Paul VI, Apostolic Exhortation On Evangelization in the Modern World *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (Boston: Pauline Books & Media, 1976), 45

<sup>3</sup> USCCB, *National Directory for Catechesis*, 57

instituted”. Horan goes on say, “although most lay religion teachers have their "catechetical green card--they know all the words, have had their sacraments and heard the church's message,”<sup>4</sup>.

Most people who volunteer to participate in the Church’s catechetical mission are men and women from a wide variety of backgrounds. Programs of formation should focus on honing the talents that these individuals bring to the table, which will help them foster the knowledge and skills they need to hand on the faith to those entrusted to their care<sup>5</sup>.

The Code of Canon Law states that “Lay persons who permanently or temporarily devote themselves to special service of the Church are obliged to acquire the appropriate formation required to fulfill their function properly and to carry out this function conscientiously, eagerly, and diligently.”<sup>6</sup>

“Lay ecclesial ministers, just like the ordained, need and deserve formation of high standards, effective methods, and comprehensive goals... failure to do so would result in faulty practice and problematic policies”<sup>7</sup>

In this paper I have emphasized the necessity and importance of formation programs for lay catechists. I will support my arguments with studies and data that suggest that lay catechists who have undergone formal training are more committed to their vocation as a catechist and to the church, than catechists who are not trained. With regard to this, I will particularly highlight the need for lay catechist formation in the Syro Malabar Catholic Diocese in India and in the US.

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<sup>4</sup> Patricia Lefevere, “Catechizing the Catechists: Religious Educators Need Support in Their Own Faith Journeys, Experts Say,” *National Catholic Reporter*, Apr. 6, 2007

<sup>5</sup> USCCB, *National Directory for Catechesis*, 235

<sup>6</sup> Code of Canon Law, c. 231, §1 in *The Code of Canon Law: Latin-English Edition* (Washington, DC: Canon Law Society of America, 1983).

<sup>7</sup> United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Co-Workers in the Vineyard of the Lord: A Resource for Guiding the Development of Lay Ecclesial Ministry*, 1st edition (Washington, D.C: USCCB Publishing, 2006), 33

Finally, I will conclude with proposals that could be adopted by various dioceses and parishes that would enhance the quality of catechesis in the church.

### **History of formation programs for catechists in the US:**

Most Bishops of the United States have placed the responsibility for the formation and certification of catechists in the hands of diocesan catechetical offices. California became the first state to adopt state-wide guidelines for the certification of catechists and master catechists. Other states have subsequently issued their own guidelines. Nationwide, however, there are neither guidelines for catechist formation courses nor provisions for mutual recognition of catechist certification. However, programs of catechist formation exist in some form in about 95% of dioceses in the United States<sup>8</sup>.

The first record of any kind of catechist training in the US is found in New York City. A group of laity took part in a Normal Training School for Catechists in the winter of 1901-1902 at a Catholic Settlement House. These lay people belonged to the parish that founded the first Confraternity of Christian Doctrine in 1901 in the US. The first diocesan CCD was founded in the Diocese of Pittsburgh in 1909 as a “Mission CCD” because they trained catechists in the rural areas of the diocese as a mission outreach. Catechist formation began in the diocese of Los Angeles in 1924 and was referred to as a CCD teacher training course.

Historically, the task of catechesis was carried out largely by members of the clergy and religious orders. However, the past thirty years have seen remarkable changes in the number of people who exercise this ministry in the Catholic church. The reason being that the number of

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<sup>8</sup> David Anthony Sork, “An Evaluation of the Organizational Effects in Parishes of Diocesan-Sponsored Catechist Formation Courses” (ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 1988), 92  
<https://search.proquest.com/docview/303653986?pq-origsite=primo>.

vocations to priesthood and religious orders has not kept pace with growth in the Catholic population. According to comparative statistics conducted from 1970 through 2020 by the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA), there has been a 40% decrease in the total number of priests (diocesan and religious) and a massive 73% decrease in the number of religious brothers and sisters in the US. Interestingly, the number of lay ecclesial ministers, that was almost non-existent in 1970 has grown steadily since the 90's and increased to about 82% by 2020 <sup>9</sup>. With the dramatic decline of vocations to the religious order, this increased lay involvement has been a blessing for the Church and is a hopeful sign for the future. However, the need to provide adequate formation for all the laity involved in ecclesial ministry is an ongoing challenge.

### **Discernment and initial formation of catechists:**

A catechist is one who continually proclaims the passion, death and resurrection of Jesus, so that it resounds in the heart of every person who hears them<sup>10</sup>. While it is difficult to gauge the level of faith and the strength of motivation that a candidate should have in order to be accepted for training as a catechist, a good choice of candidates is essential, and a relatively high standard of selection must be set<sup>11</sup>.

Candidates who are invited to be catechist should arise from within the community of faith. Such individuals should be known to the pastor and should prayerfully consider their ministry in

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<sup>9</sup> Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate, "FAQ,"

<sup>10</sup> USCCB, *Directory for Catechesis*, (2020), no. 55

<sup>11</sup> Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples, *Guide for Catechists* (Washington, DC: USCCB, 1993), no. 17

catechesis. “The suggestion that anyone can become a catechist should be scrupulously avoided in all communication involving the recruitment of catechists”<sup>12</sup>.

Commissioned catechists should be given formal training either at a diocesan catechetical center or at the parish level. “Under no circumstance should the initial formation of new catechists be improvised or left to the initiative of the candidates themselves”<sup>13</sup>. The initial formation of catechists should help the candidates develop an understanding of the nature and goals of catechesis, familiarize them with the literature and resources available for teaching, provide a thorough formation in the knowledge of the Catholic faith and teachings of the church through the knowledge of scripture and the catechism of the Catholic Church, and finally, it should guide them into a deeper daily practice of prayer and personal growth in spirituality.

Parish level formation of catechists may include encouragement to seek out a spiritual director who will help them grow in their ministry as well as seminars, workshops and retreats that are tailored to equip catechists with tools for lesson preparation and dissemination of didactic materials to the students under their care. Diocesan level training of catechists should include comprehensive catechist formation programs that lead to formal certification. Dioceses may work closely with universities and educational institutes to set up training and certification programs for catechists and catechetical leaders so that they have access to expert faculty and other useful resources including libraries, latest research as well as scholarships and financial assistance for their formation studies. While most Catholic colleges in the US have degrees and certification in theology, there are very few institutes that have programs that cater specifically to the formation

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<sup>12</sup> USCCB, *National Directory for Catechesis*, 236

<sup>13</sup> USCCB, *National Directory for Catechesis*, 237

of lay catechists<sup>14</sup>. Studies in theology may provide enrichment in many areas of spirituality and may equip the candidates with the knowledge required for transmission of faith. However, a more hands-on approach for lay catechists would be certificate and graduate programs in catechesis that include basics of theology as well as other aspects of catechesis. Such programs typically have an element of ministerial projects that help the candidates to apply the theoretical knowledge they gain to practical ministry work in their churches.

### **Certified versus non-certified catechists in parishes:**

The purpose of a catechist formation course is to prepare persons of faith to provide religious instruction to adults, young people, children, or those with special needs. In evaluating the effects of these courses on parishes, the study concentrated on two aspects of the catechists: their faith development, which includes beliefs, practices, and attitudes, and the catechists' commitment to their parish. It is noted that parishes that have more highly committed catechists will have more effective catechists<sup>15</sup>.

The fact that more than 95% of all Roman Catholic dioceses in the US conduct catechist formation programs is evidence that the Church sees them as a most important way of assuring quality catechetical formation for Catholic children in parish religious education programs. Studies conducted on effective parish religious education programs confirm how important catechist formation is viewed on both the diocesan and parish level. The extent to which parishes have certified catechists varies significantly. A study of parish catechetical programs indicated that only

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<sup>14</sup> USCCB, *National Directory for Catechesis*, 242

<sup>15</sup> Sork, "An Evaluation of the Organizational Effects in Parishes of Diocesan-Sponsored Catechist Formation Courses", 1

7% of all parishes have more than 75% of their catechists certified, while 39% of the parishes have none of their catechists certified and another 30% have less than 20% certified.

A study on parish religious education programs found that an important aspect was the formation methods of catechists, and the amount of training they received. In those dioceses that had thorough, well-planned certification programs, certified catechists were self-confident, competent catechetical professionals<sup>16</sup>. David A. Sork in his research found that certified catechists display a significantly greater development of qualities of faith and a greater commitment to the church than non-certified catechists. In the same study he found that parishes with a high percentage of certified catechists display a greater development of qualities of faith and organizational commitment than parishes with non-certified catechists. Sork summarizes various studies that explore the benefits of a formation program for catechists: Utendorf's study identified the motivational orientations of individuals taking part in lay ministry training programs and found that the motivation behind lay people taking part in the training programs were personal religious development, church and community service, and cognitive interest. Their highest motivation was their own personal and spiritual growth. Muir explored the training of catechists and found that the main function of training was to help them come to an understanding of the group culture of their Church congregation so that they could effectively transmit it to those whom they are catechizing. Frye developed a model for the formation of parish catechetical leaders that became part of a formal program at Duquesne University. A study of Catholic high school faculty recommended that schools provide teachers with opportunities for spiritual growth. In his study of

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<sup>16</sup> Sork, "An Evaluation of the Organizational Effects in Parishes of Diocesan-Sponsored Catechist Formation Courses", 172



the religious atmosphere of Catholic secondary schools, Bamonte found a significant relationship between the religious atmosphere of the school and the religious beliefs of the faculty <sup>17</sup>.

### **Lay catechist formation in the Syro Malabar church:**

The Syro Malabar (SM) Church in India is the second largest Eastern Catholic Church. In India, lay catechesis was initiated by western missionaries in the 1500s. Saint Francis Xavier played a key role in this endeavor, and was a pioneer of lay catechesis in India. One of the greatest catechetical contributions of Francis Xavier to the Church in India was the institution of lay catechists, as helpers of missionaries who served there. He focused on appointing and training lay catechists wherever he went. With a view to bringing about uniformity in catechetical methods, Francis Xavier published a book “*Instructio pro Catechesis*”, in which he described his methods of teaching catechism, which was used by lay catechists to build their skills in teaching. Xavier also reached out to SM Christians, and his missionary activities had a great influence on them. Therefore, in the Syro Malabar church, lay catechesis may have been prevalent as early as 1500s, but historical evidence of any lay ministry exists only from the beginning of the 20th century. All dioceses in the SM Catholic Church in India have vibrant and robust catechetical programs. All parishes have well-organized catechesis with teaching staff comprising of a mixture of diocesan priests, religious brothers/nuns, as well as lay people who are known as Sunday School teachers or Catechism teachers. Almost every parish has a Catholic school affiliated to it which provides holistic and balanced spiritual training to all the students. In stark contrast to the vocation scenario in the US, churches in India including the SM church have thriving communities of clergy and

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<sup>17</sup> Sork, “An Evaluation of the Organizational Effects in Parishes of Diocesan-Sponsored Catechist Formation Courses”, 63

religious men and women who receive formation in seminaries and novitiates. However, there is a huge dearth of programs that cater to the training and formation of lay catechists<sup>18</sup>. This is primarily because vast numbers of priests and religious brothers/nuns are available as catechists, and therefore, lay catechist formation programs are almost non-existent. Antony Nariculam points out various issues and challenges that hinder the success of formation programs for lay catechists, including lack of funds, disinterest of trainees, indifference of communities and/or parishes/pastors/bishops, absence of resources, lack of motivation and finally, want of a systematic approach. Gilbert Choondal, in his book, “Called to be a Catechist” points out that the problem facing Indian catechesis is inaccessible catechetical content,<sup>19</sup>. Choondal stressed that lay catechists in India do not have enough knowledge of the three major rites in India (Latin, Syro Malabar and Syro Malankara) even though the three Churches are all Catholic and in communion with each other. He goes on to say, “we need to have inter-ritual training of catechists and inter-ritual catechism textbooks so that we don’t live with ignorance about the Catholic faith”<sup>20</sup>.

The Saint Thomas SM Catholic Diocese in the US was established in 2001 and comprises more than forty parishes across the United States, with well-characterized catechetical programs for children (K-12). However, contrary to India, almost all catechists in the SM churches in the US are lay people who volunteer to teach CCD every Sunday. Although, every SM parish in the US has a flourishing CCD program under the leadership of the pastor and a lay Director of Religious Education (DRE), the SM diocese in the US too lacks formal training and formation programs for lay catechists. Echoing Choondal’s concern about the crisis in India, lay catechists

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<sup>18</sup> Antony Nariculam, “Lay Catechists in the Syro-Malabar Church,” *Nelson MCBS* (blog), July 29, 2020, <https://nelsonmcbs.com/2020/07/29/lay-catechists-in-the-syro-malabar-church/>.

<sup>19</sup> Nariculam, “Lay Catechists in the Syro-Malabar Church”

<sup>20</sup> Angelus, “New Book Explores Models for Lay Catechesis in India | Angelus News,”

in the US too lack a deep understanding and knowledge about the Syro Malabar and Syro Malankara liturgy which, although may seem archaic, is rich in ecclesial tradition and scriptural content if understood and studied well. This understanding can only come from proper training and systematic formation programs of lay catechists. The SM Diocese in the US should work towards emulating and adapting the practices of the US Dioceses in their catechist formation programs, and endorse such programs at the Parish and Diocesan level.

### **Characteristics and objectives of formation programs for catechists:**

The Directory for Catechesis points out:

Formation is an ongoing process that, under the guidance of the Spirit and in the living womb of the Christian community, helps the baptized person to take shape, which means unveiling his deepest identity which is that of being a son of God in profound communion with his brothers. The work of formation acts as a transformation of the person, who internalizes the evangelical message existentially and in such a way that it may be light and guidance for his ecclesial life and mission. It is a process that, taking place deep within the catechist, profoundly touches his freedom and cannot be reduced simply to instruction, to moral exhortation, or to an updating of pastoral techniques <sup>21</sup>.

An overall formation of catechists should include a general and a specific formational aspect. General formation would focus on their whole character and personality that should be developed whereas specific formation would include education on particular tasks they will be charged with in a supplementary way: preaching the word to both Christians and non-Christians, leading the community, presiding, when necessary, at liturgical prayers, and helping in various ways those in spiritual or material need<sup>22</sup>. As Pope John Paul II said: “To set high standards means both to

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<sup>21</sup> USCCB, Directory for Catechesis, (2020), no. 131

<sup>22</sup> Evangelization of Peoples, *Guide for Catechists* (Washington, DC: USCCB, 1993), no. 19

provide a thorough basic training and to keep it constantly updated. This is a fundamental duty, in order to ensure qualified personnel for the Church's mission.”<sup>23</sup>.

The pastoral dimension of lay catechist formation concerns the exercise of the prophetic, priestly and royal functions of the baptized lay person. This would include developing a spirit of pastoral responsibility and leadership; generosity, dynamism and creativity; ecclesial communion and obedience to Pastors. The theoretical part of the pastoral course will deal with the different types of pastoral work to be undertaken and also with the different groups of people to be addressed: children, adolescents, young people or adults; students or workers; baptized or unbaptized; healthy or sick; rich or poor; individuals or members of particular movements or groups. The practical part of the course will include practical exercises, especially at the beginning, under the direction of the teacher or a priest or an experienced catechist. Special attention should be paid to the sacraments, so that catechists will learn how to help the faithful to understand the religious meaning of these signs and approach them with faith in their supernatural efficacy <sup>24</sup>.

Ongoing formation should be an essential part of catechist formation programs. Catechists should be encouraged to renew their certification every couple of years so that they can keep up with various changes in the church doctrines and liturgical documents.

### **Challenges for the pastor, DRE and volunteer catechists:**

Catechetical ministry faces a number of challenges today. Programs of formation should work to deepen excellence in catechesis, respond to increasing diversity in background and needs

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<sup>23</sup> United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Co-Workers in the Vineyard of the Lord: A Resource for Guiding the Development of Lay Ecclesial Ministry*, 1st edition (Washington, D.C: USCCB Publishing, 2006).

<sup>24</sup> Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples, *Guide for Catechists*, no. 24

within today's parishes, broaden adult faith formation while serving the needs of children and youth, provide adequate training and resources for catechists, and advance respect and priority given to catechetical leadership as a profession<sup>25</sup>.

Adequate training for catechists is crucial for greater effectiveness in parish religious education programs and for dissemination of high quality and doctrinally sound Catholic teachings. Yet many dioceses do not require training or certification for either DREs or catechists. Further, many DREs find it challenging to find parishioners willing to volunteer as catechists and are often wary of scaring away the few available lay people by burdening them with training programs.

Diocesan Directors of Religious Education, parish DREs, and pastors agree on the importance of various kinds of training for effective catechesis. However, there are considerable gaps between what catechetical leaders consider important and what is actually required or available at the diocesan and parish levels. Catechetical leaders at both the diocesan and parish levels strongly emphasize the importance of training for catechists and DREs. While more than 98% DREs in US based parishes say such training is available in some form either in the parish or in the diocese, training and/or certification is not a mandatory requirement in about half of all the dioceses <sup>26</sup>.

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<sup>25</sup> Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate, “National Profile of Catechetical Ministry | Fall 2000”, 3 accessed December 2, 2021, <https://cara.georgetown.edu/product/national-profile-of-catechetical-ministry-fall-2000-2/>.

<sup>26</sup> Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate, “National Profile of Catechetical Ministry | Fall 2000,”

## Conclusion and recommendations:

The apostolic letter *Antiquum ministerium* by Pope Francis is very promising for the lay ministry of catechists in the US <sup>27</sup>. In explaining the contents of the letter, Archbishop Rino Fisichella at a Vatican press conference said that “the institution of a ministry by the Church is confirmation that the person invested with that charism is performing an authentic ecclesial service to the community.” Fisichella further said that the formal institution of this ministry “will make it possible to have a laity that is better prepared in the transmission of the faith,”. The catechist collaborates with the local bishop and priests in the teaching of the faith to the local community. And it can be a benefit in places where priests are scarce <sup>28</sup>.

With this in mind the following recommendations are proposed:

1. Lay catechist formation courses should be made available at the diocesan and parish level for all those wishing to become involved in lay ministry in the church.
2. Bishops and pastors should actively promote certification of all catechists in their parish.
3. Pastors should actively promote the participation of all persons in their parish in a program of formation similar to the catechist formation program if they are to be involved in any ministerial work in the parish.
4. The ministry of lay catechists should be recognized at the parish and diocesan level with small incentives or awards that would encourage them in their role as lay ministers.
5. All lay catechists who are commissioned to teach should take a pledge that their teachings will be doctrinally sound and within the teachings of the Catholic Church.

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<sup>27</sup> Pope Francis, Apostolic Letter Issued “*Motu Proprio*” *Antiquum Ministerium: Instituting the Ministry of Catechist* (Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2021), no. 9

<sup>28</sup> CNA, “What Is the New Ministry of Catechist? A CNA Explainer,”

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