

Joe Paprocki

BEYOND THE CATECHIST'S TOOLBOX



Catechesis That Not Only Informs
but Also Transforms

BEYOND
THE CATECHIST'S
TOOLBOX

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BEYOND THE CATECHIST'S TOOLBOX

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Informs but Also Transforms

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*I dedicate this book to one of the finest
catechists I ever had the pleasure of
knowing, the late Miguel Arias.
I miss you, mi amigo.*

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Introduction

In 2005, I introduced *The Catechist's Toolbox: How to Thrive as a Religious Education Teacher* (Loyola Press). Since then, tens of thousands of catechists have benefited from the tools and tips I shared in that book for becoming a more effective catechist. Now it's time to take it to the next level!

The Catechist's Toolbox is chock-full of ideas and strategies designed to help catechists—most of whom are not professional teachers—get acclimated to the world of teaching. Armed with the tools to master their role, many catechists soon realize that teaching the Catholic faith is so much more than passing along information. As they enter more deeply into the catechetical experience, they realize that they are encountering a mystery. They also

realize that guiding their learners into this mystery requires another skill set altogether.

This book, *Beyond the Catechist's Toolbox: Catechesis That Not Only Informs but Also Transforms*, builds on the foundation laid in *The Catechist's Toolbox* by helping catechists take their catechesis “up a notch” so that it reaches learners and participants at a deeper level.

My prayer is that this book will assist you in helping those you teach encounter the risen Christ in their midst, transforming their minds and hearts so that they will live as true disciples. May God grant us the grace we need to proclaim his living Word so that it might be heard!

Joe Paprocki, DMin, The Feast of St. Ignatius
Loyola, July 31, 2012

Chapter 1

How Can the Gospel Be Boring?

“This is boring!”

These three words, when spoken by young people in religious education classes, can break a catechist’s heart. How on earth can the Gospel of Jesus be boring? We catechists certainly don’t find the Gospel boring. In fact, we are on fire with the Word of God and can’t wait to share it with others and set their hearts on fire. It can be very frustrating and downright disheartening to have young people react to our proclamation of the Gospel with a yawn. If we ourselves are on fire and the message we are teaching is “hot stuff,” then it stands to reason that the fault must lie in one other place: our method of delivery. After all, whether we like it or not, *the medium is the message*.

This expression, coined in the mid-twentieth century by Marshall McLuhan, an educator, philosopher, and communications expert, tells us that a message and the manner in which it is conveyed are inseparable; the “packaging” in which a message is delivered shapes the message itself and adds to—or detracts from—its meaning. Therefore, if those we teach are bored, it is most likely because our methods are not engaging. We may be draining meaning from God’s message without intending to.

Let me give you an example. When I was a kid, I spent hours watching baseball on TV. It just so happens that the two Chicago baseball teams—the White Sox and the Cubs—were not only on different sides of the city and on different TV channels, but also they were on completely different TV frequencies. Beginning in 1968, the Chicago White Sox games were no longer broadcast on VHF TV (the band of channels from 1 to 13) but on UHF TV (the band of channels above 13). The result was a picture with terrible reception. I no longer found White Sox games interesting because the fuzzy picture interfered with the excitement of the game. To this day, I believe poor TV reception was one of

the main reasons I became a Cubs fan. (It certainly wasn't because the Cubs were winning any championships!) The excitement of baseball came through crystal clear on Cubs' broadcasts and engaged my youthful imagination, while White Sox games seemed boring.

In the same way, the problem for us catechists is not with the message we are delivering. Nor is there a problem with us; our hearts are in the right place. The problem is with our method of delivery, which, for many learners, feels like just another class period in a long school day.

The Same Old, Same Old

Much of our classroom approach to catechesis can be summed up in a three-word phrase: *reading the textbook*. Often, catechetical sessions consist of students taking turns reading aloud sentences or paragraphs from the textbook and catechists interjecting comments and questions for discussion. Yawn, right?

The problem is not with the textbook itself, however. Thank goodness for textbooks! Where would we catechists be without them? These wonderful books bring the richness and depth of our Catholic

faith and heritage to life. The words and images proclaim the Gospel in ways appropriate to young people of various ages. The catechist's manuals provide us with a clear and concise understanding of the curriculum that we are responsible for transmitting.

The problem is that we are using the textbook as though it were the one and only resource at our disposal. If catechesis were simply about *information*, this would not be a problem. We could give the textbooks to our young people, have them digest the contents, and test them on their comprehension. However, catechesis is about more than information. It is about *transformation*.

When we limit catechesis to the acquisition of information, we reduce it to a subject like all the other subjects young people study in school. Religious education gets crammed inside the locker of a young person's mind right along with social studies, science, history, and math. We catechists, however, are not teachers of a subject. We are facilitators of an encounter—an encounter with a living God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The church teaches us that the purpose of catechesis is to “put people not only in touch, but also in communion and intimacy, with

Jesus Christ” (*General Directory for Catechesis*, 80). As we all know, intimacy is not achieved by reading a book.

Before we go any further, however, let me be crystal clear that the textbook plays a crucial role in the catechetical process. And I’m not just saying that because I work for a publisher of catechetical textbooks. The fact is, when I teach, I most definitely and regularly use the textbook and catechist’s manual. However, I would venture to say that we spend no more than 20 percent of our time in my sessions reading from the textbook. The other 80 percent of the time is spent engaging in experiences that bring the information from the textbook to life, that is, teaching beyond the book.

Teaching Beyond the Book

In this book, we are going to explore how to catechize beyond the textbook, but we aren’t going to discard it. Likewise, we are going to catechize beyond the “toolbox” I provided in *The Catechist’s Toolbox*, but we are not going to discard those tools. On the contrary, we are going to use the textbook and the “toolbox” as foundations on which to build

a catechetical session that is an experience of transformation.

To find the key to teaching beyond the book, we can once again look to the *General Directory for Catechesis*, which reminds us that when “catechesis is permeated by a climate of prayer, the assimilation of the entire Christian life reaches its summit” (85). In other words, the most effective catechesis takes place in a prayerful environment. Why? Because prayer is an encounter with the living God.

Reading a textbook helps us know *about* God. Prayer helps us *know* God. Both are needed. Knowing about someone can help us know him or her better, and the better we know someone, the more we may want to learn about him or her. Teaching beyond the book works in a similar way. It makes God's presence palpable and tangible, which makes the learner long for more. In the pages ahead, we will explore a number of practical, creative, and effective ways for you to engage those you teach and help them encounter God's presence in their lives, leading to a transformation of mind and heart and an intimate relationship with Jesus Christ.

Chapter 2

More Like Mass Than Class

Recently, I spent a good deal of time researching my ancestry in preparation for a big family reunion. I uncovered story after story of forefathers and foremothers who came to the shores of the United States from Poland in the late nineteenth century. I was particularly impressed with the story of my maternal great-great-grandmother, Julia—who spoke seven languages fluently—making her transition to the new world, and Chicago in particular, so much easier.

Whenever we spend time in a country where another language is spoken, it behooves us to learn that language. Doing so makes us more capable of encountering others and developing relationships, be they social or professional. Catechesis is no different. In a very real sense, it is the process of inviting

someone to enter into a new place—a “foreign land,” so to speak. The foreign land is the kingdom of God. For many of those we teach, this land is strange and new. Its inhabitants act differently, think differently, and live differently. They speak differently, too; and to help our students enter this new reality, we must teach them its native language. Not only is it a language of love, but it’s also a language of mystery—one that often transcends words.

In fact, in the kingdom of God, words are not the primary form of expression. The inhabitants of the kingdom of God are more at home with a language that relies less on an alphabet and more on expressions that speak to and prod the imagination. So, just what are the elements of this language of mystery? Let’s take a quick look.

Sign and Symbol

In the kingdom of God, a type of sign language is spoken. Think about how Moses was drawn to encounter God—not through a wordy invitation but through the sign of a burning bush. Upon seeing this sign, Moses said, “I must go over and see this.” Signs and symbols speak directly to the

heart, through the imagination. They invite rather than command, and inspire rather than explain.

Ritual

In the kingdom of God, rituals abound. They connect us with meaningful events in our past, they ground us in the present, and they lead us confidently into the future. Rituals awaken a deeper level of consciousness within us. They remind us that we are truly at home in that special place where the spirit dwells.

Movement and Gesture

In the kingdom of God, people are often on the move—not mindlessly, like hamsters on a wheel, but intentionally, like dancers on a stage. They move about prayerfully, as though each movement is saying something. This notion is not foreign to us. A popular form of gentle exercise is tai chi, an ancient practice that promotes serenity through controlled movements that connect body, mind, and spirit. What happens to one affects the other. This is true in the kingdom of God, too: when we use our bodies for prayerful movement and gesture, the mind hears, and the heart responds.

Silence

In the kingdom of God, the primary form of expression is silence. Thomas Keating, a Trappist monk, tells us that “Silence is God’s first language; everything else is a poor translation. In order to hear that language, we must learn to be still and to rest in God” (*Invitation to Love*).

Song

The kingdom of God is a place where the music never stops. Few things can touch our hearts and transport our minds better than music and song. This must be why the psalms refer to music so often—almost a hundred times, in fact. “O sing to the Lord a new song,” the psalmist urges us (96:1). Lucky for us, God loves music, and he loves to hear us sing.

Story and Myth

In the kingdom of God, it is always story time. Approximately one-third of the recorded sayings of Jesus take the form of parables. The man could tell a story! He knew that stories create worlds—new realities that we can envision and enter into. Jesus’ stories tap into our imaginations,

compelling us to consider the possibility of an alternate reality. Author John Shea tells us that “story is the most interesting and compelling of language forms” and that “storytelling raises us out of the randomness of the moment and inserts us into a larger framework” (*Stories of Faith*). That larger framework is the kingdom of God, and we all have a part to play in it.

The language of mystery that is spoken in the kingdom of God predisposes us to the possibility of an alternate reality. The kingdom of God is, in fact, an alternate reality embedded within the one we can see and hear. We are called to enter into this reality by training our eyes, ears, and spirits to perceive the world anew. Knowing the language of mystery can help us answer the call. This is what catechesis is all about. If things were simply as they appeared, we would have no need for catechesis. However, life’s ultimate meaning is veiled and mysterious. As such, we catechize others to incorporate these various elements of the language of mystery into their souls’ daily diet.

So, where and when in the life of a Catholic is this language best spoken and heard? In the liturgy, of course. When we celebrate the Mass—or any of the sacraments, for that matter—we speak and are spoken to through a language of mystery.

The Language of Mystery

Elements	Examples
Signs and symbols	Water, oil, fire, bread, wine, and incense
Rituals	Sprinkling rites, anointings, and blessings
Movements and gestures	The Sign of the Cross, processions, and the sign of peace
Silence	Before Mass, after the Scripture readings, after the homily, and after Communion
Song	Hymns of the Mass and sung parts of Mass
Story and myth	The Liturgy of the Word

The language of mystery permeates Mass. And yet, for some reason, when we enter the realm of catechesis, we are suddenly at a loss for the nonverbal. The language of mystery is forgotten, and we revert to words, words, words.

Wordiness tends to reign in catechetical settings. Unfortunately, wordiness does not reign in the Reign of God! For these reasons, I can't emphasize enough the fact that *our catechesis should be more like Mass than class*.

I've been using this idea in my *Catechist's Toolbox* presentations for many years, and it never fails to provoke interest. I usually expand the idea by introducing the various elements of the language of mystery—signs, rituals, and so on—and encouraging catechists to incorporate them into their catechetical settings. Time and again, however, catechists have responded with frustration, saying, “I want to do this, but how can I when I have so much material to cover?”

One way we *can't* do it is by cramming elements of the language of mystery into an existing lesson plan. Instead, we must deliver the content by “translating” it into the language of mystery. We will still rely on

and incorporate words, of course, but at the same time we will be speaking in a language that transcends words. We will be speaking in a language of mystery that not only informs, but also transforms!

With these goals in mind, I began offering another workshop that went beyond *The Catechist's Toolbox* and offered an approach to catechesis that incorporates the language of mystery. In my ongoing efforts to be as practical as possible—to offer something that really works—I developed a Template for Worshipful Catechesis. This template outlines a seventy-five-minute catechetical session that incorporates the various elements of the language of mystery as a prayerful context within which the textbook content is delivered. The response has been incredible. Catechists are eagerly embracing this approach, transitioning to a model of catechesis that not only informs, but also transforms.

What follows is that template, organized into five stages for a seventy-five-minute session:

1. Preliminaries (15 minutes)
2. The ENGAGE Step (15 minutes)
3. The EXPLORE Step (25 minutes)

4. The REFLECT Step (10 minutes)
5. The RESPOND Step (10 minutes)

Together, these steps form what we refer to as the “catechetical process.” No matter what textbook you are using, its lessons are most likely arranged in steps—sometimes three, sometimes four. For the purposes of this book, I have elected to use the four-step process employed by the *Finding God* series (Loyola Press). I am doing so for two reasons. First, this is the program used in the parish where I teach, so I actually follow these four steps. Second, these four steps include a significant segment for prayer—the Reflect step.

In catechesis, prayer needs to be more than just a couple of brief bookends used to open and close the session. A prayer experience is critical if we are seeking an encounter with the risen Christ. Occasionally, a concerned catechist will say to me, “I’d like to be able to include a prayer experience in my lesson, but I have so much content to get through.” In response, I point out that prayer is a key part of the content we are delivering. Along with the Creed, the Sacraments, and the Moral Life, Prayer is one of the four

pillars of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. Without this fourth pillar, we are inviting our learners to step onto a table that has only three legs. Delivering content about Jesus without talking to and spending time with Jesus is teaching “just” a subject. And remember, we are doing much more than that.

So, without further adieu, let's explore how we can invite young people into the kingdom of God by using its language—the language of mystery.

Chapter 3

Preliminaries

15 Minutes

Every catechist knows that if a session is scheduled to last seventy-five minutes, only about sixty of those minutes will be spent actually teaching. Why? Because there are preliminaries to deal with: roll call, late arrivals, the collection of paperwork, the distribution of materials, requests to use the restroom, and the eternal challenge of getting young people to settle in and focus.

The first ten to fifteen minutes of a session don't have to be completely devoid of teaching, however. We catechists can use a variety of strategies to make the most of this preliminary period—to teach while we are busy doing things that don't feel like teaching. For this to happen, though, we must embrace the

notion I proposed earlier: our session should feel *more like Mass and less like class*. With this key idea in mind, let's take a look at some of the ways a catechist can use the preliminary period to set the tone for a worshipful and prayerful experience.

Greeting Participants with Holy Water

What's one of the first things you do when you enter a Catholic church? You dip your fingers into a holy-water font or receptacle and then bless yourself. This is a powerful reminder that, through the waters of baptism, we have died to sin and risen to new life in Christ. Why not invite your participants to enter your learning space in the same way? This can be done very easily.

Acquire a small glass bowl with a lid that seals tightly. Fill the bowl with holy water from the stoup, or dispenser, in your parish church. Bring this bowl to each session or find a place to store it in your learning space. A few minutes before your session is scheduled to begin, stand at the entrance with the bowl of holy water and invite participants to bless themselves as they arrive. Better yet, have an aide or

a reliable student assume “holy-water duty” so that you are free to continue with your preliminaries.

This ritual—an element of the language of mystery—will signal to participants that they are entering a sacred space. It will also put them in touch with a welcoming human face, one of the most powerful expressions of God’s presence. Participants will recognize the ritual as an act of worship performed when entering a church. Even if they don’t realize it on a conscious level, their minds and hearts will start to turn toward God.

Play Liturgical Music as Participants Arrive

When we enter a church, our senses are immediately stimulated. We see stained-glass windows, statues, and flowers. We smell candles and incense. We put our fingers into holy water and genuflect before entering our pew. And we hear music. Sometimes the choir or organist is rehearsing that day’s Mass music or playing background music to help us transition to worship. I suggest you offer the same auditory experience for your participants as they arrive.

Bring a CD player or MP3 player to your learning space, or arrange for one to be available. Play inspirational music softly in the background to set the tone for participants as they arrive, and keep the music playing until it is time to conduct business. You might experiment with traditional Catholic hymns, instrumental music, or contemporary Christian music, or ask your catechetical leader for suggestions or links to music that is appropriate. You might select a song that reinforces the theme of the lesson and have it play on a loop so that the melody becomes familiar to your participants. Over time, you might find yourself building your own library of music for use in your faith formation sessions.

The phrase “to sing” (and its variations) appears over 300 times in Scripture. When we want to approach God, spoken words alone do not suffice. Playing music as participants enter your learning space will introduce them to the language of mystery and to the idea that they are entering into something sacred—something that will touch them at a deeper level than words alone.

Invite Participants to Write Prayer Intentions

Tradition invites us to kneel and pray when we arrive in church. Many of us use this time to tell God what is weighing on our hearts and minds. We don't "check our baggage" at the door as we enter a church. Rather, we bring it with us and offer it to God. In the same way, you can invite your participants to develop the habit of engaging in prayer the moment they take a seat.

Place an index card and a pen or pencil at each place before participants arrive. As they get settled, direct participants to write a prayer intention for the week. The intention might be a prayer of thanksgiving, an expression of wonder or praise, or a request for help. You can either have participants keep their cards to use in the opening prayer or invite them to place the cards in a basket on the prayer table.

Getting in touch with their own gratitude, needs, and feelings of awe will help prepare your participants to encounter our loving God. Naming our joys helps us develop an attitude of gratitude that acknowledges God as the source of all blessings. Naming our needs helps us remember our

dependence on something greater than ourselves. And even the simplest words of praise remind us that we are creatures made for worship and for song.

Taking Attendance and Doing Business

As previously noted, every catechist has what feels like a million and one things to do at the start of class: taking attendance, distributing materials, addressing questions, and so on. The suggestions I've offered thus far will not interfere with your ability to accomplish these things. Instead, they may even facilitate the process by creating a prayerful, restful environment. While participants are entering, signing themselves with holy water, hearing music, and writing prayers, you can be taking care of business. The beauty of it is that through these actions, you will be teaching without even trying to.

Procession to Set the Prayer Table

Once everyone is seated and you have had an opportunity to conduct preliminary business, it's time to invite your participants into another prayerful experience: a procession to set up the prayer table.

Processions are a sacramental; they represent the spiritual journey that we're all on, and they remind us of our ultimate destination—to be with God.

As I noted in *The Catechist's Toolbox*, a prayer center can be a simple table draped with a cloth whose color reflects the liturgical season; on it might be placed a Bible and a crucifix, a statue, an icon, or another religious object. Such a space demonstrates the value of prayer and builds an awareness of the sacred. To deepen this awareness, you can invite participants to come to the table prayerfully and prepare it for your time together in a number of ways. Here is one approach.

1. Invite participants to bring their own symbols to add to the prayer table during your first few sessions. Point out that these can be religious symbols such as crosses or holy cards, or objects that remind participants of God in less obvious ways—birthday cards, flowers, or photos of loved ones, for example.
2. Before the procession, invite participants to line up along one side of the room, holding either an item from the prayer table (including

the cloth, the Bible, and the other sacred objects) or a new item they've brought with them that day.

3. Have an aide or a reliable participant lead the procession, holding a cross that will be placed on the table.
4. Play music as participants process around the perimeter of the room and arrive at the prayer table.
5. Have participants place their objects on the prayer table one by one, beginning with the cloth, the cross, and the Bible, and followed by the other objects and symbols.
6. Invite participants to return to their places quietly and prayerfully.

Instead of rushing to set up the prayer table on your own before the session begins, consider inviting your participants to set it up as described here. In doing so, you will be teaching them reverence and sacramentality—two key elements of the language of mystery. And on a more practical note, the entire procession should last no more than a few minutes. What do you have to lose?

Opening Prayer

Now that the prayer table is set, you are ready for an opening prayer experience. This prayer can take many forms. I recommend the following.

1. Invite participants to stand. Standing is the traditional posture for prayer. (Have you ever noticed how the congregation stands whenever the priest says, “Let us pray”?)
2. Pray the Sign of the Cross.
3. Continue with a call-and-response greeting that you can teach participants over the first few weeks. Here are some possibilities.

Call

This is the day the
Lord has made.

Lord, send out
your Spirit,

Our help is in the
name of the Lord,

O Lord, come to
my aid.

O Lord, open
my lips,

Response

*Let us rejoice and
be glad!*

*and renew the face of
the earth.*

*who made heaven
and earth.*

*O Lord, make haste
to help me.*

*and my mouth shall
declare your praise.*

4. Invite participants to make the threefold Sign of the Cross with their thumb on the forehead, lips, and chest. Initiate this by saying, "*Let's pray today that God's Word will be . . . in our minds [forehead], on our lips [lips], and in our hearts [chest].*"
5. After several weeks introduce the gesture by using only the italicized words above.
6. Invite participants to share a prayer intention. Pass around a candle (battery operated if necessary) and have participants either pray their own intention aloud or take one from the prayer basket and read it aloud.
7. Conclude the opening prayer by inviting participants to pray aloud a traditional prayer.
8. Consider changing the traditional prayer monthly, especially if there are prayers you wish your participants to learn.

By beginning your session in this prayerful manner, you will help participants adopt a more reverent attitude toward the catechetical experience. At the same time, you will teach them about ritual prayer,

sacramental gestures, intercessory prayer, and traditional prayer.

You're Now Ready to "Begin" Teaching

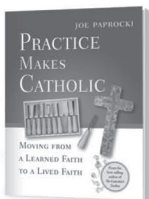
At this point, you may feel as though you are finally ready to begin teaching. The truth is that you have been teaching throughout this preliminary period. Isn't that nice to know? Instead of allowing participants to arrive on their own terms and enter into a chaotic atmosphere like recess before the bell, you have set the tone for a sacred experience in which they will encounter the presence of the living God. The stage is now set to move into a more formal experience of teaching and learning—all of it within the context and climate of prayer that you have established during this preliminary period.

Congratulations!

About the Author

Joe Paprocki is national consultant for faith formation at Loyola Press. He has thirty years of experience teaching at many different levels and continues to serve as a catechist. Paprocki is a popular speaker and the author of many books, including *Living the Mass* and *A Well-Built Faith*.

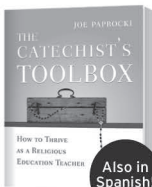
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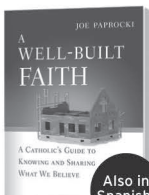


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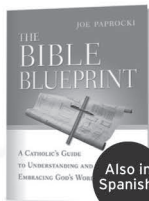
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HOW TO MAKE CLASS MORE LIKE MASS

JOE PAPROCKI, best-selling author of *The Catechist's Toolbox*, has written the first step-by-step book that demonstrates how you can teach a 75-minute catechetical session with practical techniques that expand upon the textbook to create a more prayerful and experiential climate in the classroom.

While textbooks are an essential tool for catechists to present the teachings of the Catholic Church in a clear and accurate manner, *Beyond the Catechist's Toolbox* gives you the framework to guide your students toward personal transformation. By using Catholic rituals, prayers, and the Liturgy of the Word, Paprocki provides suggestions on how to get catechesis to resemble Mass more than class.

Reading a textbook can help children know *about* God, and *Beyond the Catechist's Toolbox* helps them *know* God personally as they prayerfully become lifelong disciples of Jesus Christ.



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