

There are so many responsibilities that come with being a catechist that the task can seem overwhelming. Lee Danesco's practical, how-to guide not only eases the anxiety over these, but also expands the creative and joyful possibilities inherent in the role.

☛ **KATHY HENDRICKS**, *workshop presenter and author of*  
*Everything about Parish Ministry I Wish I Had Known*

---

If you are excited about sharing the Catholic faith with future generations, then *Here's How: A Catechist's Guide* is a necessary resource for you! With twenty-four years of experience working with both teachers and students, Lee Danesco offers valuable support and practical tips for the classroom that will appeal to both the beginning volunteer and the veteran catechist. This book will help catechists understand what is expected of them, how to prepare a successful lesson, and simple ways to motivate students. From detailed classroom activities to ideas for working with parents, this book is a must-have for every catechist.

☛ **ROBYN LEE**, *Editor*,  
*RTY's Creative Catechist*

---

Lee Danesco's *Here's How* encourages catechists to trust themselves, while it offers them advice about being precise and fearless in learning what they do not know. Lee proposes a clear design on how best to engage young people in the learning experience. From offering ways to incorporate the arts, to understanding discipline, to encouraging developing conversation skills, this book complements parish catechetical formation. The parish catechetical leader will find it an invaluable tool.

☛ **SUSAN J. KAY**, *Assistant Director of Religious Education/*  
*Catechetical Leadership, Archdiocese of Boston*

---

Lee Danesco draws on more than twenty-four years of experience when she says "here's how" ...to prepare, motivate, evaluate, maximize time, use small group activities, and get help. Her practical ideas give catechists—both the rookie and the veteran—the tools that will help them be confident in the classroom, realistic about expectations, focused on the tasks, and effective in the mission of sharing their Catholic faith with their students.

☛ **KASS DOTTERWEICH**, *Editor*,  
*Catechist*

Lee offers an informative, practical, must-read for catechists of all levels; from first-year to the most seasoned. Her detailed, organized, ingenious style leads the reader on a walk through a religious education class while she offers sound advice on planning, presentation, methods, and summary. Parishes would certainly be offering their catechists an invaluable service by providing them with their very own copy.

☛ **CATHY O'CONNELL**, *Religious Education Director,*  
*St. Jude's Parish, Norfolk, MA*

---

*Here's How: A Catechist's Guide* is full of very practical information for every catechist. Motivating students to be excited about their faith is not an easy task. Lee has clearly outlined many ideas that truly work. This book is a must for every religious education office!

☛ **KAREN ACKLES**, *Religious Education Director,*  
*St. Mary Parish, Franklin, MA*

---

*Here's How* is a masterpiece! It has everything we need for practical and meaningful teaching. It is insightful and inspiring, with a wealth of methodology that is sure to guide catechists on their journey to teach as Christ taught.

☛ **SHARON GUERIN**, *Religious Education Director,*  
*St. Martha Parish, Plainville, MA*



*The* ESSENTIAL CATECHIST'S BOOKSHELF

---

# Here's How

## A CATECHIST'S GUIDE

---

PLANNING AND TEACHING  
YOUR CATECHETICAL  
SESSIONS

---

Lee Danesco

---

*Dedication*

To Sarah, Ben, Lexi, Jake, and Ryan,  
for the inspiration of all their  
“how” questions

TWENTY-THIRD PUBLICATIONS

1 Montauk Avenue, Suite 200, New London, CT 06320

(860) 437-3012 » (800) 321-0411 » [www.23rdpublications.com](http://www.23rdpublications.com)

© Copyright 2014 Lee Danesco. All rights reserved.

No part of this publication may be reproduced in any manner without prior written permission of the publisher. Write to the Permissions Editor.

ISBN: 978-1-62785-011-7

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 2013957106

Printed in the U.S.A.

# Contents

---

Introduction . . . . .	<i>I</i>
1 How to weigh expectations . . . . .	<i>3</i>
2 How to know if you're ready to teach . . . . .	<i>10</i>
3 How to teach well for sixty minutes . . . . .	<i>18</i>
4 How to motivate students . . . . .	<i>28</i>
5 How to use small-group activities . . . . .	<i>37</i>
6 Teaching with the arts . . . . .	<i>47</i>
7 How to review . . . . .	<i>57</i>
8 How to get the help you need . . . . .	<i>65</i>
9 How to discipline . . . . .	<i>73</i>
10 How to evaluate your teaching . . . . .	<i>83</i>



# INTRODUCTION

---

Chances are that prayer, the sacraments, Mass, Scripture, and Christian service are already part of your life. In your own way and without setting out to do so, you effectively model what it means to be a practicing Catholic. You're excited about becoming a catechist and you should be. You have lots to offer.

Still, in the back of your mind, some doubts have slowly formed around a small but provocative word— “how.” In odd moments you may wonder:

How will I connect with a room full of children?

How will I teach for a full sixty minutes?

How will I manage small-group activities?

How will I know if I am reaching my students or not?

The list goes on but the theme remains the same: “How will I suddenly become a ‘teacher’ when I have never taught before?”

While not claiming to have all the answers, *Here's How* addresses common problems faced by anyone who has ever stepped up to teach children. Meeting you at teaching junc-

tures where you are most likely to struggle, *Here's How* offers support and practical solutions that can help you cross the divide between living the faith and teaching it.

Drawing on twenty-four years of experience working with both teachers and students, the author invites you to replace “How?” with “Here’s how.”

Twenty-Third  
Publications  
Sample



# How to weigh expectations

Good for you. You heard the annual request for volunteer teachers and this year decided to say “yes.” But since that moment of commitment, have you been wondering just exactly what you signed on to do?

Reviewing what is expected of the typical volunteer catechist can help you fill in the blanks by replacing wondering with understanding. The reality checklist that follows is meant to give you the focus and direction you need as you prepare to serve as a parish catechist.

## **WHAT'S EXPECTED OF YOU**

### *Have a plan*

When the first day of class arrives, you will be asked to take charge of a small group of children, in a designated learning space, to share an assigned lesson. Amidst whatever distractions or confusion that first meeting presents, the Director of Religious Education (DRE), students, and parents will expect



you to be prepared and ready to teach. You'll be expected to have a plan.

No matter the grade level, the class size, or the lesson content, every class you teach requires basic, commonsense planning. There is no escaping that chore. Planning is the pivot around which every lesson revolves.

In fact, planning is so important that well in advance of the first class meetings, DREs routinely gather volunteer catechists to lay the groundwork for the teaching year ahead.

At that meeting, or before your first class, you should receive a catechist's guide and instructions on its use. Skimming through the guide, you'll note that a sizeable portion of the weekly lesson planning has already been done for you. The guide logically divides the year's work into teaching topics arranged by chapters. Then each chapter is broken down into distinct blocks of related subject matter with accompanying activities geared to fill the teaching hour.

With so much of the planning completed, it's fair to ask what is left for you to do.

The answer: attend that organizational meeting and make the pre-structured guide material your own. The meeting ideally provides the perfect format in which to review weekly teaching plans, become familiar with lesson highlights, and share outstanding problems or concerns. Catechists' meetings can effectively raise your level of teaching readiness. You should leave the meeting supported by clear-cut directions for successfully completing your first lesson and a pattern for planning the rest.

Even if your parish does not offer this initial planning session, don't worry. You will find detailed information and explanations of lesson planning and preparation in Chapter 3: How to Teach Well for Sixty Minutes, and Chapter 4: How to Motivate Students.

***Value each child***

A positive, fair, and caring approach toward each individual student stands high on any list of what parents, students, and DREs will expect from you as a catechist.

While it sounds simple enough, the process of valuing a child takes in a good deal of territory. It includes the expectation that even in the middle of group-centered activities, crafts, or games, you will work to remain conscious of and attuned to the particular needs, challenges, and sensitivities of each individual student no matter how well masked they may be.

Accepting the challenge to value students as individuals means going well beyond simply short-circuiting the thoughtless and potentially hurtful words and actions of young people toward one another. As the catechist, you are charged with creating and maintaining the kind of classroom atmosphere in which all children can routinely feel safe and secure enough to learn and grow according to their God-given gifts.

The entire parish community, but especially parents, will count on you to insist that students in your classroom will learn to value one another as God's cherished children, and that the Christian attitude of love toward one another will prevail.

***Be relevant to student grade level***

With equal intensity, but for very different reasons, both your students and the DRE are hoping that you will begin the year motivated to teach lessons mindful of the age group you are teaching.

Children respond best when catechists use approaches, activities, language, and even humor that are tailored just for them. They are quickly turned off by classroom experiences in which the adult in charge speaks to them without eye contact

or connection, even if unintentionally. While students don't require the presence of a three-ring circus to get and hold their attention, they do prefer that you structure lessons to share "with" them, not teach "at" them.

Students don't want to feel bored, left out, or invisible in their own learning space. Your decision to teach from a mindset that welcomes student ideas, opinions, and participation can make all the difference. Students look for you to make teaching choices that are in their favor.

From the DRE's perspective, you won't be expected to arrive at the first class fully adjusted to the grade level you are about to teach. But she or he will want you to recognize the value of working toward accommodating that particular level of learners as you teach from week to week.

That's because DREs know that even your best-prepared lesson plan is likely to fall short if you fail to create rapport with your students. You don't need to take a crash course in child psychology to connect with young people, but you do need to find ways to get to know, understand, and give a feeling of comfort to your students.

Just as the religion textbook is designed to match the reading and comprehension level of your students, so your instructive stories, examples, and activities should take into account who they are and the environment that surrounds them.

Don't worry about memorizing the names of their favorite movies, songs, or heroes, but do give attention and respect to the important place those things occupy in their lives at the moment. DREs will expect you to meet children where they are because DREs know connection is a powerful first step toward engaging children in almost any lesson pursuit.

### ***Discipline***

Successful teaching requires classroom discipline. This is an axiom that experience makes difficult to dispute.

Discipline is such a crucial aspect of the total religious education program that parish leadership, including the DRE, generally assumes the ultimate responsibility for generating program-wide regulations.

It's not likely, then, that you will be asked to construct a far-reaching disciplinary code for your class. Still, it will be left to you to put in place a few commonsense rules that promote classroom order and reasonable noise levels.

Regardless of the total number or substance of rules in play, everyone from the youngest student to the most senior parishioner will expect you, as a catechist, to take an active role in enforcing standards that allow for safe and productive religious education.

### ***Model the faith***

While they might not discuss it with you very often, parents, the DRE, and children really do see each catechist as a potential faith model for students. That is why such care is given to the selection and assignment of volunteers. You are taking on a position of great trust. You are expected to model the faith for children.

Fortunately, parents and the DRE also have a realistic take on catechists. They know and respect the fact that you are neither a professional teacher nor a canonized saint. They won't ask you to be either. What they will ask is that you recognize the visible link between teaching and living the faith.

Parents expect that you will do your best to help their children explore the faith through books, crafts, games, and activities. But they also know that, beyond the lesson, other less

apparent learning is going on as well. They believe their children will learn a great lesson about how Catholic Christians live the faith through simple observation. They are counting on you to provide one trustworthy model.

When it comes to placing demands on catechists, children can be a remarkably lenient crowd. They won't mind so much if you skip a teaching point or lose your place in a story. They'll understand if you are a bit out of sorts or less patient than usual. They'll even be okay if sometimes your actions don't precisely mirror what you have been teaching. But you need to know: they will notice.

They won't expect you to be perfect, but they will expect you to give regular evidence of trying hard to live as a practicing Christian.

***Be yourself***

The catechist's guide you receive will provide you with a lesson plan and some general directions to get you started. To make the best use of those aids, you will be encouraged to use your own special collection of abilities and strengths. Yes, the DRE will expect you to stay on message, but he or she will also allow you room to broaden the appeal of a topic or make it more comprehensible to students by injecting a bit of yourself into the lesson.

Every catechist at your grade level will be teaching from precisely the same catechist's guide and conducting the same lesson, but no two catechists will share the lesson in exactly the same way. Nor should they. That's because each teacher is expected to energize each lesson through the use of his or her particular gift set. Your honest rendition of a lesson cannot help but add a personal tone and memorable twist to every lesson you share.

Each week you'll be expected to teach a unique lesson because as you teach you will be expected to be yourself.

**SUMMARY**

If all this sounds a little daunting, you may want to add just a touch of perspective:

1. *You need to have a plan*, but only for one hour at a time, and the catechist's guide has already done half the work for you.
2. *Yes, value each child*, but, honestly, how many children are we talking about—a dozen or less?
3. *Teach at grade level*, but only one grade level needs to be mastered.
4. *Discipline is a must*, but, again, the numbers are few and DRE assistance is available.
5. *Modeling the faith* is probably something you already do without knowing it.
6. *Be yourself*. To whom else could that job be given?

Knowing what is expected of you as a catechist and putting those expectations into perspective should permit you to take an optimistic view of the teaching commitment you have made. Taking a fresh look, in Chapter 2, at the skills you'll bring to this commitment will only add to your growing sense of confidence as an emerging catechist.