

Bridging the Gap between Teaching and Formation in Adolescent Catechesis with Executive Functions

by Thomas Howard

What creative strategies might assist confirmation catechists in presenting the Catholic faith in compelling and relevant ways with today’s *confirmandi*? This column highlights one such strategy, applying key learnings from the discipline of neuroscience. I believe that considering important findings and educational applications from that discipline is essential to an ongoing conversation about catechetical methodology.

Before highlighting this pastoral strategy, it is first necessary to backtrack a bit, clarifying the model of theological reflection undergirding my curious interest in neuroscience for adolescent catechesis. Thus, I first explore a foundational question: How do I engage scripture/tradition, personal experience, and cultural information to answer the question of identity in adolescent catechesis?¹

It is my hope not to simply highlight an exciting strategy for adolescent catechesis, but frame it through the lens of contextual theology.² Pastoral strategies in adolescent catechesis are most effective, in my estimation, when contextual questions concerning those involved, such as educational background and social, cultural, and biological differences, are considered.

Twofold Role of Catechesis

The General Directory for Catechesis (GDC) describes a twofold role of catechesis: (1) teaching and (2) formational. “As it is formation for the Christian life it comprises but surpasses mere instruction.”³ Two concerns often surface when catechists are challenged by church leadership to meet both of the Bishop’s criteria in their catechesis. First,

1 James D. Whitehead and Evelyn Eaton Whitehead, *Method in Ministry: Theological Reflection and Christian Ministry* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1995), 14.

2 See contextual theologian Orlando O. Espin, *Grace and Humanness: Theological Reflections Because of Culture* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2007), at ix: “Is there a theology that is not contextual? Has there ever been a theologian who is not contextualized? All theologies and theologians are culturally bound and therefore there can be no exceptions.”

3 Congregation for the Clergy, *General Directory for Catechesis*, 1st ed. (Washington, DC: USCCB Publishing, 1998), no. 68. Hereafter, the *General Directory for Catechesis* will be abbreviated as GDC.

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the window of time we are afforded to make inroads on bridging the gap between formation and education is insufficient. The best we often can do is simply pass information on to the *confirmandi*. Second, current cultural trends in our society make catechesis less and less of a priority.⁴

The following three questions help me keep the bishop's two guidelines in balance:

1. What practical difference does celebrating a sacrament make in the daily lives of teens today?
2. How does God work through his church and his ministers to offer human beings salvation through sacraments?
3. How does my personal identity as a catechist shape and form my catechesis?

I believe the Holy Spirit invites each catechist to hold such questions in creative tension before drawing up lesson plans. God's grace organically weaves itself into pastoral praxis, I have come to realize, when a disciplined effort is made to systematically reflect before acting in catechesis.

Open-Ended Questions

Each time I ready myself to engage in adolescent catechesis, the three aforementioned questions serve as vivid reminders that achieving a perfect balance between teaching and spiritual formation will never be fully realized. As youth culture changes, so too should one's method. Methodology in adolescent catechesis, therefore, will always be a work in progress.⁵ Open-ended questions, particularly those that avoid putting teens on the spot or causing any potential embarrassment, have assisted me in addressing both practical and theological concerns in adolescent catechesis for a great many years.⁶ The genius of open-ended questions is that they first encourage ministers to listen; second, they follow up with the *confirmandi* for clarification; and, finally, they make possible real life connections to be made between the content of the faith and the context of lived experience. This last step, providing currency for sacramental and church life, is my favorite, for it gifts me with a graced moment to witness to my faith.⁷ Having demonstrated how open-ended questions can address both sacramental and practical concerns in adolescent catechesis, I now turn to the question of identity.

Catechesis as a Field Hospital after Battle

More often than not, it is parish and school catechists who serve the confirmation students like the stretcher-bearers in Mark's Gospel, first picking up those paralyzed by sin and then slowly carrying them to Jesus where they can find healing. The effort it takes to view tangible results in adolescent catechesis is much like that of the stretcher bearers, who were forced to make an extraordinary decision and cut a hole in the roof so as to lower the paralytic down to the feet of Jesus for healing. Our ministry is not for the faint of heart.

"Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Rise, pick up your mat and walk?'" (Mk 2:9). Adolescent catechists know firsthand that what Jesus tried to communicate to the scribes during the first century still applies to us today. Spiritual paralysis is far more debilitating than physical paralysis.

4 One such cultural and social trend that currently challenges catechesis in Chicago is the fact that family life is becoming increasingly overextended. With a greater emphasis on test scores, organized (as opposed to spontaneous neighborhood-based) sports, and individualism, quality time at church and catechesis is shrinking. Swimming meets and football games, even between Catholic schools, is now commonplace during weekends in Chicago.

5 *GDC*, no. 148.

6 *GDC*, no. 150.

7 The *GDC* tells us that "The charisma given to the catechist by the Spirit, a solid spirituality and transparent witness of life, constitutes the soul of every method. Only the catechist's own human and Christian qualities guarantee a good use of texts and other work instruments." *GDC*, no.156

Jesus seeks to heal even our deepest hurts, but many who suffer from spiritual paralysis, unfortunately, lack a companion, one who is capable of accompanying them along the rocky road of being healed. In the hyper-busy culture that envelopes many Catholic teens in Chicago today, it is the confirmation catechist who unwittingly falls into the role of accompanying young people who are burdened with unhealed hurts.

The model for my catechesis, therefore, can be more likened to a field hospital after battle than a classroom.⁸ Catechesis can be not only an exciting place where young people actively participate in the learning about the Catholic faith and prepare for sacramental celebrations, but perhaps, more importantly, it can be a sacred place where *confirmandi* make conscious decisions to want to become whole again. Just as it took great courage for the paralytic to ask for help to be healed, so too it takes great faith on the part of confirmation catechists to embrace a catechetical model where they are called to accompany the *confirmandi* to Christ's healing.

I now turn attention to sharing an approach informed by a growing body of neuroscience research, which has provoked a paradigm shift for me as a religious educator. The following example is culled from my experience in adolescent catechesis but the method employed in this example is more universal and can easily be exported to other age groups.

New Tactic for Adolescent Catechesis: Executive Functions

The social sciences have served as my principal conversation partner in catechesis for many years. Sociology, for example, not only equips me with scientific tools to collect critical data from those with whom I engage, but it also assists me with a sociocultural perspective of sacred scripture.⁹

At a recent Catholic educator professional development workshop, the discipline of neuroscience, to my surprise, joined the social sciences as a conversation partner in the laboratory where I experimented with catechetical models and strategies. An executive functions teacher workshop, sponsored by the Rush NeuroBehavioral Center in Chicago, helped me learn everyday teaching practices designed to develop student executive function skills.¹⁰ Executive functions are an excellent predictor of success in contemporary education, especially due to the fact that screens are changing the way the young brain develops. Here are just a few ways screens affect the development of the twenty-first century brain, according to the Rush Neurobehavioral Center: shorter attention spans, an emphasis on immediate rewards, breadth over depth, staccato communication, reduced efficiency, neural pathway brownout, and possible long-term memory deficits. These behaviors, unfortunately, are becoming more and more prevalent in the lives of students participating in our catechetical programs.

Executive functions serve as an antidote to these counterproductive factors by teaching goal-directed behaviors, organizational processes, strategic preparation, critical purposeful analysis, self-regulation, and self-awareness.

8 Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium: Apostolic Exhortation on the Proclamation of the Gospel in Today's World*, https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html, no.76.

9 Theologian David Horrell is skilled in applying the social sciences in scripture interpretation. See David G. Horrell, *The Social Ethos of the Corinthian Correspondence: Interests and Ideology from 1 Corinthians to 1 Clement*, 1st ed. (Edinburgh: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2000).

10 A few years ago the Office for Catholic Schools of the Archdiocese of Chicago approved Rush NeuroBehavioral Center as a vendor for professional development workshops. Thanks to their valuable contribution of creatively adapting executive functions for middle school children, Dr. Georgia Bozeday and her team have resourced hundreds of Catholic school educators with invaluable tools. For more information see Georgia Bozeday and Julie Gisdapow, *The Middle School Executive Functions Curriculum Notebook* (Chicago: Rush NeuroBehavioral Center, 2014).

Letters to the Bishop

With this new understanding of executive functions in mind, I quickly applied them to a letter-writing project which is organized each year in our program. Every year, prior to their confirmation, the *confirmandi* are required to write a letter to the bishop, introducing themselves and providing a reflection on their sponsor, saint, and community service activities. I wondered what would happen if the letter-writing process slowed down, approaching this yearly event not just as a task to check off, but rather as a good opportunity for catechists to bridge the gap between education and formation. Could a more incremental approach to the letter-writing project encourage young people to want to be healed?

In the past years a great majority of letters to the bishop read more like confessions than a conversation sharing the fruits of research on a particular saint, the choice for an adult sponsor, or how they accomplished the community service requirement in the program. Unhealed hurts, I realized, had sustained the ugliness of sin within a great majority of their relationships.

Consideration of executive functions shifted the paradigm in this letter-writing project while reevaluating our yearly benchmarks. A more deliberate and incremental approach to catechesis, we realized, could foster grace-filled moments for our program participants. By first attending to the difficult task of dealing with unhealed hurts, our classrooms could begin to resemble the field hospital after battle which Pope Francis had highlighted in so many of his talks to pastoral leaders. Rather than stressing out about the percentage of completed letters to the bishop, renewed energy could be discovered in teaching the sacrament of reconciliation and inviting young people to go on retreats.

Thanks to applying an important tactic from executive functions of dealing with the most difficult task first, our students not only started asking their catechists how to make good confessions but actually made inquiries on the parish website on when and where they could actually make their confessions. Instead of curtailing or even circumventing core learning objectives from our curriculum, this tactic, in fact, paved a way for catechesis to organically integrate into parish life. This simple tactic, in short, built a strong bridge between formation and information in adolescent catechesis.

Summary

Three moments undergird arguments for improving the field of adolescent catechesis. First, open-ended questions not only surface the common need for humans to heal hurts through Jesus Christ in culturally sensitive ways, they also connect young people with the rich cultural vocabulary of Catholic faith in a practical fashion. Second, the question of catechetical identity can be explored by paying careful and prayerful attention to how scripture/ tradition, personal experience, and cultural sources intersect in one's ministry. Finally, the strategy of incorporating executive functions with the project of writing letters to the bishop creates an effective, efficient, and efficacious opportunity for young people to integrate heads, hearts, and hands in adolescent catechesis.