
Module 6: Listen to the children

Session 1: Start each child off on the right foot

Objective: Develop the crucial listening skills necessary for shaping a faith journey for children.

Usually, before you start an important journey, you do a little bit of planning. You think about the route you'll travel, what to take, and where you'll stop along the way. In children's RCIA, we also need to do a little bit of planning. Indeed, in order to know what route to travel on the road to Christ, we first need to listen to the children who are seeking initiation.

Listen to the seekers

Way back in Module 1, Session 1, we pointed out that the children are seekers. "They seek Christian initiation either at the direction of their parents or guardians, or with parental permission, on their own initiative" (RCIA, no. 252; Canada, no. 242). Thus, once the children grace our parish doorsteps, the first step of the journey is to find out what they seek and what they need. I suggest you do this by having an initial conversation with the child and parent. The initial conversation might look like what I've outlined below.

The initial conversation

After noticing on the religious education registration form that nine-year-old Derek was not baptized, I called his mom and asked if she and Derek could meet with me. About a week later, the three of us sat down to talk, and the conversation went something like this:

- Welcome! We're so happy you registered for religious education. I noticed you're new in the parish and this is Derek's first time in religious education. We'd like Derek's experience to be as meaningful and helpful as possible. Would you tell me a little bit about Derek's religious formation up to this point and what brings you to our parish? *(Upon Derek's request, he and his mom have been coming to church for a few months. His mom provides some information about the family's religious history. She wants Derek to be baptized.)*
- Derek, how do you feel about what your mom just said? Do you want to be baptized? *(Derek shrugs, with not much to say.)*
- Let me tell you about our process for preparing children for baptism. (Briefly describe children's RCIA. Then ask his mom if she'd be willing to come to sessions.)
 - At some point you also need to obtain basic information such as contact information, church and sacramental information of family, school and grade information, parental information including custody and marriage issues. Also, ask whom they know in the parish. This can help when finding sponsoring families.

- Derek, would you be willing to come to some sessions with your mom?

After Derek unenthusiastically agrees to come to the sessions, I talk with him about his notions of God and his previous faith formation. The purpose of these next questions is to begin to determine Derek's level of faith formation. The depth of his formation will help determine what the period of evangelization and precatechumenate will look like and how long it will last.

Adapt the following questions to fit the child and the situation.

- Tell me what you know about God? Jesus?
- Who are some of the people who have taught you about God?
- Do you ever pray to God? Could you tell me about how you pray?
- What are some Bible stories you have heard? Do you have a favorite?
- Tell me about any churches that you have attended? What did you like about them?
- Why do you think you might want to be baptized?

As it turned out, Derek did not have much to say about God or Jesus or church. It became fairly evident that Derek needed to be evangelized and that his mother could benefit from a re-evangelization. Thus began the period of evangelization and precatechumenate.

On the other hand, it's also important to note that the period of evangelization and precatechumenate "began" well before Derek and his mom came to our parish. The Holy Spirit was already well at work in their lives leading them in their journey to the living God. The RCIA describes the beginning of the journey this way:

After hearing the mystery of Christ proclaimed, consciously and freely [they] seek the living God and enter the way of faith and conversion as the Holy Spirit opens their hearts (no. 1; Canada no. 1).

Therefore, as we begin the precatechumenate, we need to be aware that the Spirit has led the children to us and that the process of conversion began long before. The children's responses to those initial questions that you ask will help you determine what you need to do in the first few precatechumenate sessions. For example, with Derek it was clear that we needed to do some simple sessions on who God is and God's great love for us. Derek needed to hear the basic good news. And it didn't hurt for his mom to hear it again, too! You'll see the session we did with Derek in Exercise 3.

In concluding this first session on precatechumenate, we've given you some ideas on starting off the process with an initial conversation with the child and parent. Take a look at Exercise 1 for more details on the initial conversation.



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Session 2: Three keys for evangelizing children

Objective: Discuss what happens during precatechumenate, and provide a sample precatechumenate session.

Once you have met the child seeking initiation and her or his parent, then you can begin to determine what the period of evangelization and precatechumenate looks like. For example, for someone like Derek from the previous session, you might start with basic welcoming sessions on God and Jesus and the Bible. However, a child who is already evangelized needs a different type of precatechumenate—or maybe not much precatechumenate at all.

How to design a precatechumenate that's right for your child inquirers and their families

In order to design a precatechumenate period that's right for your child inquirers that are starting the RCIA, you need to take into account three influencing elements:

- What the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults says about the period
- What the children's needs are
- What the Rite of Acceptance into the order of catechumens tell us

What the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults says

The RCIA tells us that this first period "is a time of evangelization: faithfully and constantly the living God is proclaimed and Jesus Christ whom he has sent for the salvation of all" (no. 36; Canada no. 36). This evangelization leads to an "initial conversion" (no. 37; Canada no. 37). For children, evangelization leading to initial conversion means that they get to know who God is and how much God loves them. To use the words of the rite, they are "drawn into the mystery of God's love" (no. 37; Canada no. 37).

Another way of describing evangelization for children is to say that they hear the good news. They hear the good news of God's love for them as found in the person of Jesus Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit. A primary way of proclaiming the good news is to share the stories of the sacred Scriptures with the children and then tie those stories to the good news stories in their own lives.

What the children's needs are

Again, let's return to the story of Derek. When I tried to talk with him about God and Jesus and the Bible, he didn't have much to say. Granted, some of this was because I was a stranger, and he did not want to talk to

me. Nonetheless, his mother concurred that there was not much sense of God or church in their home. So, Derek needed to see how God was already present in his life and loving him unconditionally.

However, many children come to us already evangelized. In your initial conversation with evangelized children, you see that they already have a sense of God; they know the basics of the good news and Jesus Christ. If the child already has experienced initial conversion and has a “genuine will to follow Christ and seek baptism,” (no. 37; Canada no. 37), then they may celebrate the Rite of Acceptance and begin the period of the catechumenate without delay.

What the Rite of Acceptance into the order of catechumens tells us

The Rite of Acceptance is the culmination of the precatechumenate. Thus, if we study this rite, it tells us what has happened in the preceding period. So, study the rite carefully to better understand what happens during precatechumenate. See paragraph nos. 260-270 (Canada nos. 250-260) for an adapted rite for children. But use the rite from Part I, nos. 41-74 (Canada nos. 41-74), when you have children and adults. Here are a few things the signs and symbols of the rite tell us about what happens in precatechumenate with children.

- **Cross** (nos. 54-56, 266-268; Canada nos. 54-56, 256-258)—The children are covered with the sign of the cross. This tells us that during the precatechumenate they learn something about the meaning of the cross.
- **Becoming a Christian** (no. 264; Canada no. 254)—In the opening dialogue, the children are asked why they want to become Christian, and they respond, “Because I believe in Christ.” This tells us that during the precatechumenate they must come to a basic understanding of what it means to be a Christian and who Christ is.
- **Word of God** (nos. 60-64, 269-273; Canada nos. 60-64, 259-263)—The children are invited to “officially” share in the table of God’s word. This tells us that during the precatechumenate they have come to know something of God’s word, and they are invited to feast more deeply on the word.
- **Acceptance by the community** (nos. 47, 48, 262; Canada nos. 47, 48, 252)—The children are accepted by the community and become part of the household of Christ. Literally, the rite begins outside the church, and the children come into the church. This tells us the children must have some general notion of what it means to be part of Christian community.

These points alone tell us there is a lot going on during the precatechumenate. Further study of the Rite of Acceptance will give you a deeper understanding of what happens during precatechumenate. Take a look at Exercise 2 to guide you through a reading of the rite.

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Session 3: The five steps for developing a precatechumenate session

Objective: Learn how to design a precatechumenate session that fits your children and your parish.

We have talked about what happens during the period of precatechumenate, and you've given thought to the three elements of designing a precatechumenate session:

- what the rite says
- what children need
- the Rite of Acceptance

Now let's look at how to build a session.

Start with the kids' experience

For precatechumenate sessions especially, although this could be said about all good catechetical methods, start with human experience. Begin with the life experience of the children who seek initiation. Then connect their experience to the life of God and the word of God. Then add a welcome to the beginning and a prayer to the end of the session, and you've created a precatechumenate session. The five-step model looks like this:

1. Introduction and welcome
2. My story (start with the children's experience)
3. God's story (give input from Scripture and tradition)
4. Connecting my story to God's story (activity that connects 2 and 3)
5. Response and prayer

I'll give you a very detailed version of this five-step process in Exercise 3 where I flesh out a sample session. But, for now, I'd like to continue to talk about how *you* go about deciding what precatechumenate sessions are like in your parish.

Determining what to do in precatechumenate

There is no syllabus or curriculum to follow in the precatechumenate. What you do during precatechumenate depends upon the three elements described in the previous session. Of course, this also means that precatechumenate sessions change as the children and families change. One time you might spend numerous sessions talking about God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit because the notion of God, or God

becoming human, is new to the children. Another year you might spend a lot of time on Scripture stories because there is little familiarity with the Bible. Another time you might spend multiple sessions on discipleship and community because there is lots of interest in the church.

Although little can be determined a priori, you can do some planning. And you know that in all likelihood certain questions and topics will arise. Plus, you know from Rite of Acceptance that some topics like God, Christ, the word of God, cross and resurrection, discipleship, and church will be discussed with the children and their families. I have found in my 25-plus years of experience that the topics listed below often arise during precatechumenate when the children are unchurched and in need of evangelization.

Please understand that this is *not* a list of topics “to be covered,” and there is no particular order to the topics listed, and sometimes we spend three or four sessions on one topic. Nonetheless, this gives you a feel for the kinds of things we often talk about in precatechumenate:

God

Jesus

Holy Spirit

Saints and communion of saints

Being a disciple

Liturgical year

Advent

Christmas

Lent and Easter

The church

Jesus and the cross

Our parish and the local church

Mary

From the Scriptures

Overview of the Bible

Creation

God calls us—Abraham and Sarah

God’s covenant: God’s chosen people

The Exodus

The Ten Commandments



The prophets

King David

The messiah

The gospels

Jesus' parables

Jesus' miracles

The last supper

The crucifixion and resurrection

Pentecost

The early church

A word about the word of God in precatechumenate

If children are forming a relationship with God and developing a friendship with Jesus during the precatechumenate, then of course, there will be Scripture stories included. The stories are woven into the sessions. For example, when you are talking about Jesus you bring in stories of his healings and parables and miracles. The list above does not mean to imply that you have a session on each item.

On the other hand, I have found that when you move into the period of the catechumenate, it helps if the children have a *very basic* understanding of some elements and persons of the Scriptures. If they know some of the basics, it makes the dismissal catechesis during catechumenate a bit more effective. For example, if they know things like Old and New Testament, the Israelites, the Exodus, and the prophets, it makes catechumenate catechesis a little smoother. Will they forget? Yes, of course, but formation lasts a lifetime.

It's not just butterflies and rainbows

Some folks may argue that since precatechumenate is about evangelization, we don't do any real catechesis. Real catechesis, the argument goes, is for the catechumenate. Evangelization is only about welcoming, friendship, loving, caring, and sharing, i.e. butterflies and rainbows.

Yes, evangelization is about those things. But in addition, evangelization clearly includes some appropriate catechesis (see *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, no. 23, *General Directory for Catechesis*, no. 49). We just have to keep in mind the needs and ages of the children and goal of conversion to the person of Jesus Christ.

To illustrate more clearly how this all fits together, go to Exercise 3 where you'll find a sample precatechumenate session.

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Session 4: The three central movements of transition: preparation, celebration, reflection

Objective: Outline the steps that lead up to and follow the celebration of the Rite of Acceptance into the order of catechumens.

When Derek and his mom first started coming to pre-catechumenate sessions, their attendance was sporadic at best. But I wasn't bothered by this because pre-catechumenate is a kind of "come and see" phase. It's a casual period that lasts as long as it lasts. However, secretly, I must admit that I didn't think that'd last long. After all, they only came to every second or third session.

Gradually, however, they started to come more regularly, then very regularly. And I began to see them more regularly in church, too. Sometime after that, I was listening to Derek describe how he was like the boy with five loaves and two fish, and I knew he was ready to move onto the period of the catechumenate. So he and his mom talked about it. Our RCIA team talked about it. And he soon celebrated the Rite of Acceptance. (See Exercise 4 for ideas on "what we talked about" when discerning Derek's readiness to move to the catechumenate).

Immediate preparation for the rite

We've already described how the entire pre-catechumenate is the remote or general preparation for the Rite of Acceptance. In addition, in the weeks just before the celebration of the rite, do some specific spiritual preparation with the children and their parents. The purpose of the spiritual preparation is to help the children "tune into" the ritual language and meaning of the rite. We do not want to explain away the ritual. Instead, we want to "prime" or prepare the children to fully enter into the ritual experience.

Since the primary symbols of the Rite of Acceptance are cross, word, and acceptance by community, you may spend two or three sessions focusing on these ritual symbols. Also, reflecting upon the Scripture readings of the rite is helpful. Here is an example of what a spiritual preparation session might look like:

- Opening prayer with reading from the rite, John 1:35-42 (see RCIA, no. 271; Canada no. 261)
 - Reflection Question: *How are you following Jesus?*
 - Or guided meditation on the gospel
- Reflection on the cross (have a large cross, not a crucifix) featured in your enthronement. *Following Jesus leads to the cross. What are some of the tough things a person your age might have to do in order to follow Jesus?* Talk about examples.
- Age appropriate activity, such as making crosses or doing a service for others

Celebrating the rite

Work with your liturgist and presider to prepare a thoughtful and well choreographed rite. Rehearse with parents, companions, and sponsors, but not with the children who will become catechumens. If your presider is well prepared, the rite will go smoothly, and children don't need to rehearse. Be sure you have microphones for all those making introductions and giving testimony.

Reflecting after the rite

The conclusion of the Rite of Acceptance is the first time the catechumens will be kindly dismissed from the Liturgy of the Word (no. 67; Canada 67). The children will go with you or another catechist to a space you've prepared in advance. There you'll gather around the word and reflect upon the rite you just celebrated.

Recall from Module 5, Session 3, the suggested format for reflecting upon a liturgical rite:

- Begin with a brief spontaneous prayer and then a guided recollection of the celebration. Call to mind some of the main elements of the rite.
 - *"Let's all take a deep breath and think back to this special celebration we just had...Remember standing outside church with your parents, waiting for Father to begin...Think about how you felt as your mom or dad introduced you to the parish..."*(Continue with highlights of the rite.)
- Ask the children to share their response to a question that helps them key in on their first reaction to the rite:
 - *"What stands out for you as an important part of this rite or ceremony?"*
- Allow time for all to share.
- Then ask deeper questions.
 - *What did (whatever they named above) mean to you?*
 - *What did it tell you about God? Christ? The church?*
- Lastly, wrap up by asking for a response.
 - *So what? How does this call you to act differently?*

When Mass is complete, or at another time later in the week, invite parents to participate in a similar reflection. It's important for them to have an opportunity to process the liturgical experience.

FUN FACT

Create an Enthronement

One of the fun and creative things you get to do as an RCIA catechist is to create an enthronement for each session. An enthronement is a reverently prepared, not-overdone, centering piece for your sessions. It usually includes a Bible or lectionary, a candle, and a liturgically appropriate colored cloth on a table. For this first rite, spend time preparing a special enthronement that contains elements of the rite like a cross and a Bible.

Once the children have celebrated the Rite of Acceptance, they have made the transition into the period of the catechumenate. Thus, our next module will focus on the period of the catechumenate. Before we move on to catechumenate, please go to Exercise 4, and also take time to dialogue with others about the precatechumenate in our online forum.

