

Module 8: Teach the faith

Session 1: We teach God's word

Objective: Discover how our catechetical plan flows from the Sunday Liturgy of the Word.

Here is what a typical Sunday might look like when you are doing catechumenate catechesis with children in the RCIA. It has three parts:

- 1) Children and families celebrate the Liturgy of the Word at Mass.
- 2) Child catechumens are dismissed from the Liturgy of the Word and go with their leader to break open the word.
- 3) Families, sponsors, and companions gather with child catechumens after Mass for a catechetical session that flows from the Liturgy of the Word.

Although there are many variations of this general three-part structure, let's start here. In this session, I'll give more details as to what these three parts look like and why we do catechesis this way. Then, in Sessions 2 and 3, we will show you how to prepare for and how to do the dismissal session. In Session 4, we'll show you how to prepare for and do the extended catechetical session. Plus, this module will feature a fifth session that discusses the Rite of Election, which culminates the period of the catechumenate.

Why do we teach from the liturgy?

We do catechesis this way because it flows from the Eucharistic celebration, which is the heart of the Christian community. We are teaching these young catechumens to be one of us. Thus, we teach them by having them present with us — with the Body of Christ. They experience Jesus Christ in the word, and then we “break open” what they heard and help them understand it and live it. This type of catechesis makes fully formed and committed disciples.

So, why do we teach from the liturgy? Isn't it easier to just use a textbook and teach baptism when we get to the chapter on baptism? We teach this way because we are doing more than teaching. We are forming these new young Christians in our way of life, and the Sunday liturgy is *the most important* thing we do. Sunday liturgy is when the community is gathered celebrating our most sacred, holy mystery: the Eucharist. Participating in the Liturgy of the Word at Sunday Eucharist forms the children in faith. It forms them in our way of life. It prepares them “for their eventual participation in the liturgy of the eucharist” (no. 75.3).

Let's look at the three-part structure of how we teach from the liturgy.

Part 1: Liturgy of the Word at Sunday Mass

The point of departure for catechumenate catechesis is the word of God. More precisely, it's the word of God as proclaimed in the Sunday Liturgy of the Word. Everything we teach flows from the word that the children hear at Mass. It's going back to the whole "liturgical catechesis" thing we described in Module 5.

- Children are led to the Liturgy of the Word (prepare).
- Celebrate the Liturgy of the Word (celebrate).
- We gather and reflect back on what we have heard. This reflection calls the children to respond and points to the week ahead, whereby we are led back the next Sunday to the Liturgy of the Word (reflect and respond).

And so the children are constantly led back to be fed at the table of God's word and then "sent out" into the world. They are fed and nourished at the community's table and strengthened to be disciples of Jesus Christ.

Part 2: Reflect upon God's word

However, these are young, yet-to-be-full disciples. They are new to the word. They need help and guidance in understanding the word. Plus, because they are unbaptized, they do not yet participate in the Liturgy of the Eucharist. They are "kindly dismissed" and meet with their dismissal leader to break open the word.

In breaking open the word, the leader "breaks open" the word by delving into a little bit of the age-appropriate background information of the Scripture reading. The leader helps the catechumens to better understand God's message and apply it to their lives.

Lastly, the leader gently guides the discussion toward the catechetical session that will follow, drawing out themes that will be pursued in the catechetical session, or Part 3.

Part 3: Word leads into doctrine

From the word flows the doctrine. From the discussion of the Scriptures comes the doctrinal content for the catechetical session. Let's take an obvious example to illustrate how this all fits together.

(Part 1) It's the second Sunday in January, the Feast of the Baptism of the Lord. You listen to the readings during the Liturgy of the Word at 9 o'clock Mass. After the homily, Father invites the catechumens to come forward. He then dismisses you and the children, and you process out of church, following the lectionary.

(Part 2) You gather in the library and place the lectionary on the enthronement table, next to a candle and large glass bowl filled with water. You light the candle, pray an opening prayer and break open the word. The focus of your discussion is the baptismal images.

(Part 3) After Mass, everyone joins you and the children in the library. After summarizing the discussion from Part 2, you use

FUN FACT

A Joyful Sight!

The gathering of the child catechumens for dismissal is one of my favorite moments. I love to turn around when I am up in front of church waiting for the kids to come forward for dismissal. It's such a joyful sight to see their heads pop out of the pews, and then they scurry to the front to join me. The first couple weeks, they are hesitant to come forward because they are not quite sure that Father is talking about them. Initially, it may take a little coaxing. But they soon get the hang of it.



those same images to begin a catechetical session on baptism. You may even use the water, or the Jordan, as your point of departure for the doctrinal catechesis.

The point of all this is discipleship

Ultimately, when we form children in a way of life, we are making true disciples. God's word works wonders. Take a look at Exercise 1 for help on learning how to build catechumenate sessions.

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Session 2: A step-by-step outline for preparing for the dismissal session

Objective: Learn what you need to do to be ready to lead an effective breaking open the word process and catechetical session.

In the first session, we gave you a general outline of the three parts of catechumenate catechesis. In this session, we'll show you how to prepare for Part 2, the dismissal session. (Part 1 is the Liturgy of the Word, so that is already prepared for you.)

Preparation is essential. Spending time reflecting upon and studying God's word in preparation for the sessions will not only make you a better catechist, it will help you to be more attuned to the readings at Mass. I also suspect that reflection on God's word will deepen your personal faith. I recommend that you follow the preparation procedure given in this session, adapting it to fit your style and your needs.

Also, keep in mind that you don't have to do all three parts of catechumenate catechesis by yourself. You may enjoy working with various partners. One person might do the dismissal session (Part 2), and another might do the extended catechetical session (Part 3). Just be sure you collaborate on your efforts as the dismissal session *usually, but not always*, leads into the catechetical session. Sometimes the children want to talk about a part of the Liturgy of the Word that is different from what you intended or prepared. That's fine! Let the Spirit work as she may!

FUN FACT

The Lectionary Readings

You can find a reference to the lectionary readings for every day of the year at uscgb.org/bible/readings. Most parish bulletins also list the readings for the upcoming week. Or ask a parish staff member for a paperback copy of the lectionary. Or ask for an easy to use resource such as *At Home with the Word* (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications). This paperback book has the weekly readings as well as helpful commentary and prayers. Some parishes give it to adult catechumens.

A word about the word we hear at Mass — the lectionary

Let's take a moment to clarify the term "lectionary," since so much of catechumenate catechesis is based on the lectionary. The lectionary is the church's liturgical book of Scripture readings. It's the book that contains the Scripture readings the lector and the presider read from at Mass. It has selected readings from the Bible arranged according to the liturgical year. Thus, certain readings are heard at Advent, Christmas, Lent, Easter, and Ordinary Time. And the readings are arranged in a three year cycle: Year A, B, and C.

When we refer to the lectionary readings, we are referring to the Scripture readings that are given in the lectionary for that particular Sunday. Thus, before you start your preparation for catechumenate catechesis,

you will want to have a list or a reference or a book that gives you the lectionary readings for the Sunday you are preparing. Give yourself plenty of time to prayerfully prepare.

Personal catechist preparation for catechumenate catechesis

(Note: Much of this preparation process is very similar to what is in my book, [A Child's Journey: The Christian Initiation of Children](#), available from [TeamRCIA.com](#)).

1. **Pray.** Begin with prayer and ask the Holy Spirit to guide you as you prepare. Ask for openness to God's word and wisdom from the Spirit. Pray for the child catechumens, candidates, and their families.
2. **Read** the three readings and the psalm for the given Sunday. Read slowly and deliberately.
3. **Sit silently** with the word. Let it resonate within you.
4. **Read the readings again.** This time make note of words or images or phrases that strike you or stand out for you.
5. **Name the message** or images or questions that emerge for you.
6. **Consult commentaries** on the texts. Ask the RCIA coordinator, director of religious education, or pastor for a resource you can keep at home for easy access. The purpose of reading the commentaries is to provide you with expert insight and background information from Scripture scholars. This insight and information will deepen your understanding of the Scripture and help you be prepared to discuss the readings with the children.
7. **Merge the insights** you gained from the commentaries with the question or image that most struck you in the reading.
8. **Summarize.** What is God's message for me? How am I being called to respond?

Now, move to the children and prepare for them.

Preparation for the catechumens and candidates

1. **Read the readings with an ear for the child.** Listen for the images, characters, and words that would capture the imagination of your catechumens. What questions might these readings raise for your catechumens? Of course, the ages of your catechumens will make a difference as to how the readings are heard.
2. **Focus on the gospel.** The gospel is primary. Therefore most dismissal sessions should begin with attention to the gospel.
3. **Consult lectionary-based materials** for children. Like the commentaries for adults, these child-focused resources provide good background information that is appropriate for children. Determine what Scriptural background information you need to give the children to help them better understand the reading.
4. **Note the doctrinal topics** that emerge from the readings. Jot down ideas and questions that might be addressed in the session after Mass.
5. **Determine the direction you want to take** with the children. Now it's time to decide in which direction the Spirit is leading you. Deciding what direction you will take for the dismissal session also influences the catechetical session that follows. Determine the focus of your discussion, and then

FUN FACT

Exegesis

It's a great word. It means the scholarly, scientific interpretation of the Scriptures.



form the questions you will ask as you lead the dismissal session. See Session 3 for sample questions and for what a dismissal session looks like.

6. **Decide on the catechetical or doctrinal topic** for the catechetical session that will follow the dismissal session.

How about trying this preparation process? Do some practice preparation, and see how the process feels to you. Check into the online forum and share your thoughts with others. Now, please, go to Exercise 2.



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Session 3: How to break open the word with children

Objective: Master a beginning-to-end process for breaking open the word.

With the [lectionary](#) held high and leading the way, we processed down the center aisle, out the door, and over to the parish center. I placed the lectionary on the enthronement table, lit the candle, and began, “Let us pray...”

I had barely finished the opening prayer, when Matthew chimed in, “Where’s Cody? He’s always here.” After confessing that I did not know where Cody was, we added a prayer for Cody’s health and safety, as well as for all children in the world who were sick or missing.

The story serves to illustrate three points:

1. The catechumenal group had formed a Christian community where the children genuinely cared about one another.
2. The ritual nature of breaking open the word had been established. The catechumens had grown accustomed to maintaining silence until after the opening prayer. It’s important to note that those who are breaking open the word are still connected to the rest of the worshipping assembly that is celebrating the Liturgy of the Eucharist in church.
3. As Christians, we are called to care for all people, not just our own. Thus, encourage children to look beyond themselves.

Back to breaking open the word

The opening scenario gives you an idea of how to start a dismissal session. Let’s spell out what you do after the opening prayer:

- **Opening remarks** to prepare the children to hear the word again (optional). Depending on what question I intend to ask, sometimes I prepare the children for the question that will follow. See sample in Exercise 3.
- **Proclaim the gospel** (The gospel is preeminent, but you could use the first or second reading.)
- **Silence**
- **Initial question** — Points the children in a direction and prompts their initial response. Fairly open-ended, but not too broad. Examples:
 - How do you think Jesus was feeling when...?
 - Why do you suppose Jesus...?
 - Why would the disciples...?

- Did you notice...? Why is that?
- **Provide brief [exegesis](#)** — Giving children a small amount of this important information helps them learn to interpret the Scriptures from a Catholic Christian perspective.
- **Deeper question** — The follow-up question helps children apply the [exegesis](#) you gave them to their initial response. This question helps the children to deepen their understanding of God’s message.
- **Ask for a response** — Ask a “So what?” type of question. Encourage them to name what they will “do” this week in response to God’s word.
- **Closing prayer**
- **Break**

The dismissal session ends about the time that Mass ends. Thus, take a break and re-gather for the extended catechetical session with parents, sponsors, and companions joining you. However, you certainly do not *have to* meet on Sunday. You could also meet on a weeknight to do Part 3, the catechetical session. However, I much prefer Sunday because it is the day the community gathers. Thus, the RCIA families are more readily in the midst of the community. Plus, family life is so crazy during the week. I find there are fewer scheduling conflicts on Sunday morning.

Speaking of scheduling

At some point, before the period of the catechumenate begins, you need to think about scheduling doctrinal topics for the catechumenate. Each session takes a fair amount of preparation, and catechists need time to reflect and prepare. It’s impractical to think that you’ll just read the readings and come up with a “topic” for each session. Remember that catechumenate catechesis is “complete in its coverage” (no. 75.2).

Therefore, I suggest you meet with members of your children’s RCIA team and discuss what doctrines will be covered which week. Furthermore, I also suggest you work with the coordinator of adult RCIA on scheduling. Don’t worry about “covering” everything. We’re not teaching every doctrine of the Catholic Church; we’re forming disciples of Jesus Christ. And, if you follow the lectionary, then “within the cycle of a year...the Church unfolds the whole mystery of Christ” (*Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, no. 102). Now, that is certainly “enough.”

RESOURCE:

Friends on the Way: Children’s Catechumenate Resource

Dismissal and Catechetical Sessions for Every Sunday of the Year

Friends on the Way is a terrific resource for your catechumenate sessions. You can make as many copies as you like for the members of your team, and you never have to worry that your catechesis will be “incomplete.”

Transition from dismissal session to catechetical session

Since the catechetical session flows from the Liturgy of the Word, as well as from the dismissal session that precedes it, it’s important to have a transition piece as you begin the catechetical session. You could do any or all of the following:

- Use the same enthronement from the dismissal session for the catechetical session. The enthronement reflects elements from the Liturgy of the Word.
- Read a passage from one of the readings.
- Sing the responsorial psalm or another song from the Liturgy of the Word. Tie this together with opening remarks that point to the doctrinal session.



- Invite one of the catechumens to summarize what was discussed in breaking open the word.
- Ask the dismissal leader to summarize what was discussed in breaking open the word.

This transition piece then begins the catechetical session where you bring in the doctrines and dogmas of the church. We will explore that in the next session. But, let's wrap up this part on the dismissal session by going to Exercise 3.

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Session 4: Build a customized catechetical session for your catechumens

Objective: Learn each of the elements necessary for a complete catechesis for your catechumens in your children's RCIA.

Although there are a few very good resources out there for catechumenate sessions in children's RCIA, I want to show you how to build your own. The advantage to designing your own sessions is that you can make them fit with the needs of your catechumens and their families. In this session, we'll talk about how to build a session that flows from the Liturgy of the Word. But, if you don't have time to design your own sessions, I recommend, [*Friends on the Way*](#), by Janet Miller, found at TeamRCIA.com.

Let's first review what we've done in the previous sessions and what we'll do now.

- Session 1 — gave you an overview of the three parts of catechumenate catechesis
- Session 2 — showed you how to prepare for a dismissal session (breaking open the word)
- Session 3 — showed you how to lead a dismissal session
- Session 4 — In this session, we'll show you how to prepare a catechetical session that flows from the dismissal session.

After you've done the personal catechist preparation with the readings (Session 2) and you've done the breaking open the word (Session 3), now you can turn to the extended catechetical session that follows. As you were reading and reflecting upon the readings, you noted doctrinal themes or topics that emerged from the readings and the commentaries. Go back to that list, and let's start from there.

How do I know what topic to choose for our catechetical session?

1. **Pray.** Ask the Spirit to lead you as you select the best direction to take. Read the readings again as part of your prayer, if you find that helpful.
2. **Review the themes, issues, and questions** that emerged in your preparation for the dismissal session. Often, one or two themes are particularly dominant.
3. **Consider the needs of the child catechumens and their families.** By this time, you know the children pretty well. Also, consider where you are in the liturgical year and what other types of catechetical experiences your catechumens may have. (For example, children are also participating in first Communion preparation sessions).
4. **Choose the appropriate topic or focus for your session.** Begin to design the session.

Design a catechetical session that will be a fun learning experience for your catechumens

Let's stay with the 28th Sunday in Ordinary Time (the example from Exercise 3). Here's what I did to prepare.

After prayer and reflection on the lectionary readings, it became clear to me that the theme emerging from the readings, for the young and middle-school age catechumens at St. Joseph, was "Eucharist as a great banquet." Then, I took these steps to plan each step of the session:

1. **Opening prayer, gathering, and transition from breaking open the word** — Decide how we'll make the transition to the catechetical session. Should I make remarks? Or have one of the kids summarize? Or read the readings again?
2. **My story** — Create an activity that will help the children and families think about their own experience of a banquet, or party, or fancy, important dinner. (*Brainstorm with large group. Tell stories of a good party, dinner, or banquet you attended.*)
3. **Church's story** — What parts of the church's teaching on the Eucharist flow from these readings? What is appropriate to teach at this session? Consult first Communion preparation resources or others for points to teach. (*I picked out a few points to cover with kids. Adults will meet in a separate area, and a parent from a sponsoring family will lead the discussion.*)
4. **Connecting my story to the church's story** — How do these teachings have an impact on the daily lives of the young catechumens? What kind of activity will help the catechumens and parents connect 1 and 2? How can I make this fun and interesting? And get them up and moving? (*Do small group work. "If you were in charge of the party, what would you do? Create your own banquet."*)
5. **My response** — How do these teaching call the catechumens and parents to live or act differently? How can I call that forth from them? (*Who will you add to your table?*)
6. **Closing prayer and ritual** — Is one of the minor rites of the catechumenate appropriate here (nos. 81-103)? Or should I do another type of prayer or ritual? (*Sharing bread ritual.*)

I recently did this session, and it turned out pretty well. When you go to Exercise 4, you'll see complete details of the session.

Put it all together

Let's put all the pieces together and show you what a typical Sunday morning might look like;

- 9:00 Mass — Celebrate Liturgy of the Word
- 9:30 Dismissal of catechumens and candidates from Mass to do dismissal session
- 9:35 Breaking open the word (dismissal session)
 - Catechist, catechumens, candidates gather around the lectionary
 - Opening prayer
 - Opening remarks to prepare children to hear the word
 - Proclamation of the word (usually just the gospel)
 - Silence
 - Initial question
 - Children's response
 - Simple [exegesis](#)
 - Deeper question



- Children's response
 - Closing prayer
- 10:00 Break and refreshments (parents, companions, sponsors, or godparents join)
- 10:15 Extended catechetical session (see session in Exercise 4)
- 11:30 Closing and wrap up

Lastly, remember that you won't be doing a catechetical session every single week. Catechumenate catechesis is only one aspect of the suitable pastoral formation the catechumens receive during the catechumenate (no. 75). In closing this discussion on catechumenate catechesis, please go to Exercise 4 for more detailed information on the catechumenate session.

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Session 5: Rite of Election with children

Objective: Explore the necessary steps to prepare your children for Election.

Well before the Rite of Election is celebrated with the children, attention needs to be given to:

- Discerning readiness for the rite
- Choosing godparents

Discernment, godparents, and the rite — the three go together

Interestingly, the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults devotes a good amount of attention to the rite of election for children and their readiness for the rite, but also tells us that the rite is “optional” (nos. 277-278). Instead of speculating as to why this rite might be considered optional, we’re going to focus on the question of readiness.

The rite clearly states that “the Church judges their readiness” based on the testimony of parents, godparents, and catechists, and on the “reaffirmation” of the children themselves (nos. 278; Canada n/a). Thus, I suggest that, if possible, you have the candidates, with the parents’ help, choose their godparents well before the Rite of Election. See RCIA no. 11 on choosing godparents. If you have had sponsoring families involved in the process, the candidates may or may not choose the adults in the sponsoring family as godparents.

Then, involve the godparents, parents, sponsoring family, and catechists in the discernment process. And just what is it that we are discerning? We are discerning whether or not the children are ready for the sacraments of initiation. The church says we are discerning whether or not “those children ... have the dispositions that make them fit to take part...in the sacraments of initiation” (no. 278; Canada n/a).

Suggestions for discerning readiness

Again, the rite gives us some fairly clear guidance that we are to have a sincere “deliberation” as to the “catechumens’ suitability” (no. 122; Canada no. 109), and that godparents, catechists, priests, deacons, and parents should be involved. I suggest a process that looks something like this:

- Give parents (and godparents, if appropriate) a take-home discernment guide. This guide contains questions for parent reflection and questions they can discuss with their children. See Exercise 5 for suggested questions and a guide to readiness.
- Meet with parents (and godparents, if appropriate) and catechumens individually to discuss their readiness; OR

- Have a “pre-Lenten” discernment retreat where your entire group comes together for a morning or evening of prayer and discernment.
 - Parents, godparents, and sponsors give testimony as to how they see God working in the child catechumen’s life. If there are concerns as to whether or not the child is ready for the sacraments, that should be dealt with well before the discernment day.

Rite of Sending of the Catechumens for Election

This is the rite that is celebrated in the parish at the end of the catechumenate. (Note: The Rite of Sending is an adaptation for the United States.) Since the Rite of Election is typically celebrated at the cathedral, the Rite of Sending allows for the parish to “express its approval of the catechumens and to send them forth” for election (no. 107; Canada n/a).

Your most important job as a catechist is to prepare the godparents and companions to give testimony at the Rite of Sending. The ritual text calls for godparents to give rote answers when asked if the children are ready for the sacraments. However, it’s much more meaningful and effective if you prepare the godparents to speak from the heart when asked if the children are ready.

For example, have the godparents and companions actually “give evidence of their conversion” instead of just answering, “They have” (no. 112; Canada n/a).

Preparing for the rite of election

Although discernment is certainly an important part of preparation for the Rite of Election, additional immediate preparation for the ritual is also needed. Indeed, prepare the children for the Rite of Sending and the Rite of Election using the first step (prepare for the rite) of liturgical catechesis outlined in Module 5.

You may want to do two preparation sessions, one for the Rite of Sending and one for the Rite of Election. It depends on how and when your parish celebrates the two rites and when you have the catechumens sign the Book of the Elect; at the Rite of Sending or at the Rite of Election.

At this point, it’s hard to determine all these details. Rather, I suggest for now, focus on how you would help the children and their parents prepare for the Rite of Sending and Rite of Election. I suggest having one or two sessions where you focus on the following liturgical signs that are primary in these two rites:

- Testimony or affirmation — Signs of how God is working in the child’s life. See questions in no. 283 (Canada n/a; see instead no. 118).
- Signing one’s name in a book — a “pledge” or a promise to be faithful and true.
- Election — Church is giving voice to election by God.

After the celebration of the Rite of Election, be sure to spend time unpacking the meaning of the rite, which also closes the period of the catechumenate and begins the period of purification and enlightenment.

Before we move onto purification and enlightenment, spend a little time with Exercise 5 and share your thoughts on the online forum.