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Day 1

Recall Your Calling as a Religious Educator

“As each one has received a gift, use it to serve one another as good stewards of God’s varied grace.” (1 Pt 4:10)

Whether you have chosen this ministry as a career or you are volunteering your time to the Church, your work as a religious educator is a calling from God. Blessed Basil Moreau, founder of the Congregation of Holy Cross, pointed out that “since God alone provides the means for the successful accomplishment of any task, it seems evident that a person needs to be called by God to be an effective teacher” (*Christian Education*). The *National Directory for Catechesis* echoes Moreau’s words: “The call to the ministry of catechist is a vocation, an interior call, the voice of the Holy Spirit” (228).

On the first day of this thirty-one-day journey, you will take some time to listen to the voice of the Holy Spirit

and consider how you have been called to teach the faith. Understanding the *why* behind your work as a religious educator is absolutely essential because while the challenges of evangelization and catechesis are many and immediate, their rewards are mostly long-term. The joy in doing the work must push you through the good times and the bad. Basil Moreau put it more bluntly: “Without this call to teaching, how will anyone be able to put up with everything that teachers face daily?”

Teaching—especially teaching religion—is challenging. It can come with all sorts of doubts, both from students and from within ourselves. However, do not be discouraged. Recognize that catechesis is a calling from God and that together as a Church we go forth in passionate pursuit of God’s will.

How do we recognize God’s call? Usually, we do not hear God’s voice in a dream like the prophet Samuel (1 Sm 3:1–18), and we are unlikely to find any burning bushes like Moses (Ex 3) any time soon. Rather than waiting for a magnificently profound sign, we can find our calling in both what we love to do and in the needs of those who require our love the most.

In many of the examples of God’s calling in the Bible, the focus is more upon the needs of the people who will be

ministered to rather than the skills, talents, and experience of those who were being called. For example, Moses was not eloquent in speech, yet he was called to speak to the Pharaoh about securing the release of the Israelites from Egypt. Peter was just a fisherman Jesus called by the Sea of Galilee, but he became the leader of the Church. David was just a young boy with a slingshot, yet he was called to defeat a great warrior, Goliath.

In each of these stories, there is a great need, and God calls individuals to meet these needs despite their lack of personal talents, skills, abilities, and experience. When they succeed, they do so because of their faith in God's assistance. Whether you are a first-year teacher or catechist or someone with years of teaching experience, God sends you a call to meet his children's greatest needs and supports you in the work.

Our mission as religious educators is important to the Church's mission of evangelization. So many Catholics are leaving the Church because they misunderstand the Church's teachings. Many of our students' parents do not take their children to Mass on Sundays. Morality is derived more from psychology than theology. Prayer is seen as something only grandmothers do. It is to these desperate needs that you are being called to religious education. You

will not be able to solve all of the Church's challenges on your own, but know that these needs are out there. The question for today's exercise is which need are you being called to address the most? What do you see as the biggest challenge for your students?

Exercise: Define Your Calling to the Classroom

Make a list of the needs that you are most passionate about addressing through your work as a religious educator. This is your "Big Why List." When teaching gets tough and you just don't seem to be getting through to your students, review and remember this list. Your Big Why List is a great indicator of your calling.

Use the following questions to develop your Big Why List:

- If I had to choose just one lesson about God that my students need to hear the most, what would it be?
- What is one belief my students struggle with the most?
- What is one spiritual practice my students could benefit from the most?

- If I could help my students make one change in their lives, what would it be?
- What aspect of the faith are kids missing the most in their lives?
- What are the biggest problems adult Catholics experience in the Church?

Star or circle the answers that either get you excited or make you angry. If there is only one answer that gets you really excited, then consider this the focal point of your call to teach. These great needs are placed upon your heart as a calling from God. You are in a special position to meet these needs in your role as religious educator.

When I completed this exercise, my list had problems like “kids don’t know how to pray on their own” and “kids misunderstand the meanings of sin and grace.” The thing that gets me really fired up, though, is a simple statistic: “one out of every ten Americans is an ex-Catholic” (*Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life*). Since many of these ex-Catholics were once enrolled in religious education programs and attended Catholic schools as children, I see this as a problem I can address in the classroom. Like many other religion teachers and catechists, I want to share my passion for the Catholic faith so that others can develop

a similar love for God and the Church. This desire is what gets me through the difficult times as a teacher and catechist. This need is so great that I cannot help but push through the daily roadblocks and challenges of religious education.

What about you? What gets you fired up? What part of the world needs changing the most, and how can you incorporate that into your call to the classroom? Go through the questions listed here and spend some time considering the ones that clearly reveal what God has placed on your heart as a need you must address.

Going Deeper

Read one of the stories of God calling out leaders in the Bible, such as Samuel (1 Sm 3:1–18), Moses (Ex 3), Jonah (Jon 1), the Apostles (Mt 4:18–22), Matthew (Mt 9:9–13), and Paul (Acts 9:1–22). Ask yourself:

- What did these people feel passionate about?
- What aspect of their calling kept them going when things did not go well and when times were rough?

Day 2

Recognize Your Relationship with Christ

“Who do you say that I am?” (Mk 8:29)

As the *National Directory for Catechesis* suggests, catechists’ “personal relationship with Jesus Christ energizes their service to the Church and provides continuing motivation, vitality, and force of their catechetical activity” (229). Not only are we called to the classroom with a *purpose* (Day 1), we are called there by a *person*. Without Christ at the center of our ministry as religious educators, we will not be able to participate in the spiritual growth of our students.

Catechesis is about more than knowing information; it is about knowing a person. Pope John Paul II expressed it best when he wrote, “the definitive aim of catechesis is to put people not only in touch with but in communion, in intimacy, with Jesus Christ (*Catechesi Tradendae*, 5). Recognizing where you are in your own relationship with Christ and taking steps toward deepening that relationship

will help you through that process. The most important thing you do as a Catholic religious educator is to introduce your students to Christ and help them to foster a relationship with him.

In order to put others in communion and intimacy with Jesus Christ, you must first seek this intimacy with him yourself. It is not enough to just be in touch with your beliefs about Christ; you have to be in touch with the person of Christ. You need to come to know Christ in new ways and go deeper in your relationship with him by opening up in trust and curiosity to his will for you.

Exercise: Recognize Your Relationship with Christ

Whenever we meet another married couple for the first time or participate in a marriage encounter at our parish, my wife and I usually get to tell the story about how we first met and how our relationship blossomed into marriage. Sharing the memories of how we met, dated, got engaged, and were married always gets us energized about our relationship. Sharing these special memories reminds us why we first chose to love each other and commit ourselves to each other.

In this exercise, you are going to tell a similar story, the story about how you met Jesus and how you continue to grow in intimacy with him. On a piece of paper or in a journal, describe your relationship with Christ. Use the following writing prompts and questions for help:

- **First, write how you met Jesus Christ.** What is your first memory of him? How were you introduced to him? How long have you known him? What is one of your earliest memories of him?
- **Next, write about the ways you got to know Jesus more deeply.** Did you go to a Catholic school? Were you enrolled in a parish religious education program? Were you involved in youth ministry? Did you participate in a catechumenate process? Was your family influential in helping you get to know Christ? Did a husband, wife, or friend help you to get to know him more?
- **Finally, write about your current relationship with Jesus.** How often do you spend time with him in prayer? When do you pray? Where do you pray? How do you pray? Do you get to know him more by reading the Bible? Do you keep him in mind throughout your day? How does the

Eucharist or the Sacrament of Reconciliation help you grow closer to him?

Write in whatever format you find fits with your personality. You can write in paragraph form or make a random list. You can draw a timeline of your life and describe memories of certain occasions you were most aware of Jesus' presence. You can also use drawings to illustrate these memories if you are a visual learner.

Finally, review what you have written. Imagine that Christ is there with you having a conversation. Talk to him about these memories. Recount the memories with him as if you were recounting stories with an old friend. End with a prayer of thanksgiving for his presence in your life.

Going Deeper

Choose a person in the New Testament who had a relationship with Jesus (Mary, Joseph, Peter, Paul, Lazarus, Zacchaeus, the woman at the well, etc.). Read a story about an interaction between them and consider how your relationship with Jesus is both similar and different. Ask yourself: Is there room for me to grow in deeper intimacy with the Lord as these first disciples and other saints have done?