



Growing Up Catholic

How to Form Families with Learning Centers

by Paul Canavese

Why Whole Family Catechesis?

Parents are the ones who have the most influence on whether their children will remain Catholic when they reach adulthood (or while they are kids, for that matter). However, most parish catechesis focuses on children, with their parents absent. *Whole family catechesis* takes a different approach, by forming parents and children together.

In the *Joy of Love (Amoris Laetitia)*, Pope Francis encourages this method, saying, “Family catechesis is of great assistance as an effective method in training young parents to be aware of their mission as evangelizers of their own family.” (#287)

In working with many communities that take a whole family approach, we have found:

- ▶ Most parents have not had faith formation since they were children. They lack confidence and are intimidated by catechetical textbooks. They need help to understand their faith better and to grow in relationship with Christ. Parents can't pass on what they don't have.
- ▶ Families need to *practice* engaging their faith. Encouraging families to pray, talk about faith issues, and have more family time together is not enough. We need to provide a time and place for them to actually *do* it and learn what it looks like.
- ▶ Parents want to pass on faith to their children, and will step up when we give them the tools to embrace their role.
- ▶ Families can have fun learning about their faith! In our busy culture, families have less and less time when they are really present to each other (and having fun). Give this gift to your families.

Why Learning Centers?

One effective method for organizing whole family catechesis sessions is called “learning centers.” In this approach, each family works together on a series of short, fun, interactive activities. These activities are usually spread throughout a meeting space, placed on separate tables. Families rotate through multiple activities during a single gathering, spending five to ten minutes on each.

The activities are self-directed, with a simple instruction sheet listing step-by-step directions. Parents work with their own children to understand and complete the activity together. Activities often use additional worksheets and craft supplies and teach faith insights through action and discussion.

Leaders introduce the session, watch the schedule, and float throughout the room to answer questions, encourage families, and make sure no one gets stuck.

There are many advantages to this approach, including:

- ▶ **Hands-on, interactive learning** is a very effective way for children (and adults) to understand even abstract concepts. They are especially helpful for non-linear learners who may otherwise struggle.
- ▶ This model makes it **easy for almost any parent** to both learn and act as catechists of their own children. No parent preparation is required, and they can easily and confidently read the numbered instructions and help their children learn. Learning centers are not intimidating, as a text can be.
- ▶ Families with **multiple children can have a shared experience**, instead of being split up by age group.
- ▶ Learning centers are much **easier to lead** than other catechetical models. A session with many families can potentially be run by a single catechist. We have found that it is relatively easy to find volunteers willing to help set up or act as floaters (it is much less intimidating than running a classroom). Discipline becomes a non-issue, since parents are working with their own children.
- ▶ Worksheets and crafts are brought home and serve as **faith reminders**, whether it's a page posted on the refrigerator, a bookmark slid into a book, or a mealtime prayer on the dining room table. This is an effective way of bringing faith into the home, where it should thrive.

Key Principles

Here are some important guidelines to help you be successful in partnering with your parents. You are called to facilitate and nurture the primary role of the parents as they, together with their children, learn about their faith in a family setting. Be sure to go through these with any volunteers who will be helping at the event so you are all on the same page.

- ▶ **Be welcoming to families of all shapes and sizes.** Pope Francis makes it very clear in *The Joy of Love* that we should walk with all families, not just traditional ones. We want to help all children grow up Catholic and all parents grow closer to God and the Church.
- ▶ **Be welcoming to outsiders.** Remember that some who attend may not regularly attend Mass. Many come to these meetings to support their children. We want to make them feel welcome and comfortable here.
- ▶ **Empower the parents.** Even though some of your parents may not know their faith well and could make mistakes, we never want to make them look ignorant, especially in front of their own children. Provided answer keys. Be sure that your floaters are attentive to this and gentle while helping.
- ▶ **Don't take over from the parents.** One of the points of having an event with learning centers is to put parents in the driver's seat. By all means, help them out if they have a question or are stuck, but give the families space to work through the activities themselves. There is no need, for example, to explain the steps to each learning center to the large group.
- ▶ **Help the parents grow in their faith.** Encourage parents to make their own personal and faith reflections during the process. In some cases this may mean they fill in their own worksheets, alongside their kids.
- ▶ **Encourage conversation.** Another reason to have parents fill out their own worksheets is that it is one of the best ways to bring families into meaningful faith sharing conversations. For example, it's one thing for mom or dad to help their child think through what he or she is thankful for, but it will make even more of an impression when parents specifically express their own gratitude. Remember, kids learn best by example!

Calendaring Your Learning Centers

We recommend using learning centers as part of a 60-90 minute gathering of families, although you can also use the activities in a variety of ways.

Some communities use a whole community approach during all of their catechetical gatherings, but other popular methods are to alternate between sessions using a regular curriculum and whole family sessions or offering whole family sessions once per month.

You could also try adding a single learning center activity to the beginning or end of classroom sessions, when parents would be dropping off or picking up their kids. However, you will really see the positive effects of this approach when you can commit to it and give these families time together to really connect.

Selecting Your Resources

It is generally very difficult to adapt catechetical textbooks for use as learning centers, because they use a completely different pedagogy. You will need to either develop your own resource or find one with qualities that work well in this format. Here are qualities you should look for in a resource, many closely aligned with the principles stated above:

- ▶ **Simple, numbered, step-by-step instructions** that parents can follow without any preparation.
- ▶ **Fun and interactive activities** that kids and parents will enjoy working on together.
- ▶ **Activities that help participants grow in their faith**, both kids and parents. The point is *not* just to have craft activities on the table.
- ▶ **A resource that starts family conversations**. It is essential to help families learn how to talk to each other about faith topics.
- ▶ **Components that are sent home**, that will remind families to continue the process there.
- ▶ **Answers to any non-obvious questions**, made easily accessible to parents, but not too easy for kids to see.
- ▶ **A down-to-earth approach** that will not “turn off” or scare away parents who may be on the margins of the parish.

Example Resources

Here are some resources that work well as learning centers. They are all available for sale at: <https://pastoral.center/whole-family-short-activities>

		Pages	Activities	Code	Parent Instructions
Growing Up Catholic Faith Activities	on What Makes Us Catholic	138	33	GUC856	✓
	on Prayer	100	33	GUC851	✓
	on Service	112	33	GUC852	✓
	on the Bible	100	30	GUC853	✓
	on Saints	180	72	GUC854	✓
Sensing the Seasons: Learning Centers for the Church Year		120	40	PW113	
Seeing Jesus: Social Justice Activities for Today on Matthew 25		220	60	PW112	
Fall Learning Centers: Mary, Saints/Beatitudes, Thanksgiving	English edition	77	21	JE100	✓
	Spanish edition	77	21	JE100S	✓
Critters around the Crèche: Advent, Christmas, Epiphany		120	34	PW115	
Praying by Number: Creative Prayer Lessons & Activities	Volume 1	72	20	PW110	
	Volume 2	72	20	PW111	
Experience the Saints	Volume 1: Sts. Patrick, James the Greater, Hildegard	200	24	PW201	✓
	Volume 2: Sts. Francis, Clare, Margaret of Scotland	200	24	PW202	✓
	Volume 3: Sts. Joan of Arc, Thomas Becket, Agnes	200	24	PW203	✓
	Volume 4: Sts. Peter, Catherine Sienna, Scholastica	200	24	PW204	✓
52 Interactive Bible Stories		74	52	PW100	

Preparing Your Event

Preparing the Schedule

First check if your resource already has a suggested outline or schedule. If not, it is easy to make your own. Consider adding the following components:

- ▶ Opening prayer and/or song
- ▶ Large group introduction or sharing, possibly with a Scripture reading
- ▶ Learning centers (the majority of the time)
- ▶ Large group sharing on what we learned
- ▶ Closing prayer and/or song

Selecting the Learning Centers

Determine how much of your session is available to working on the learning centers themselves. Learning center activities should generally take 8-12 minutes to complete.

You do not have to make available all of the learning centers provided in your resource. Note that some learning centers work better with kids of different ages, so you will want to make sure there are enough for the age groups that will be present. You may also want to label or physically group them based on age appropriateness.

Preparing Your Supplies

Be sure to carefully read through the instructions from your resource, including supplies for each learning center. Also be sure to make enough copies of the learning center pages:

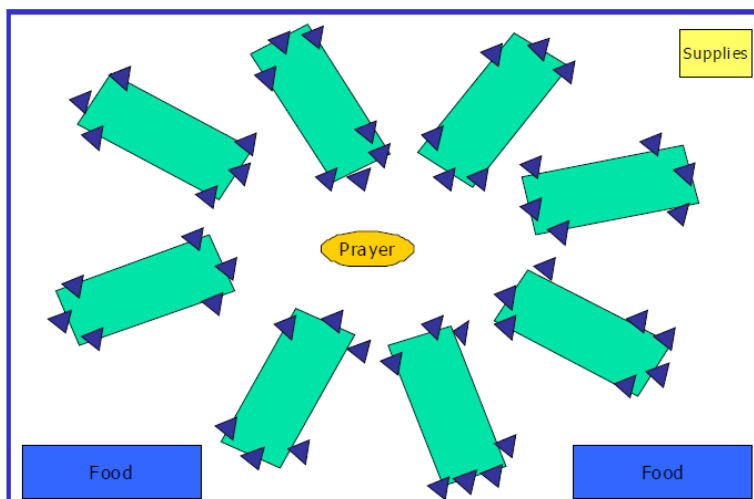
- ▶ Instruction sheets and pages that are not written on can be re-used by different families. You will need fewer copies of these.
- ▶ You will need more copies of any consumable worksheets. Some may be used only by the children, while others may be used by all family members.

We also recommend that you bring:

- ▶ Name tags and markers.
- ▶ Signs to welcome and announce the event.
- ▶ Beverages and snacks.
- ▶ Music to play softly while everyone arrives.

Preparing Your Space

If possible, hold your event in a large space with various tables and a central table that you can use as a sacred space. An ideal space would look something like this:



Learning centers will be placed on the green tables, and the clumps of blue triangles show families seated together.

You have different options for how to manage the rotation of the centers:

- **Rotate the families.** This is the most common model, in which you place one learning center on each table or even in separate rooms. After a family completes one learning center, they get up and move to another table. This approach is usually the least confusing to participants, as the handouts and other materials for each center are in distinct places. The physical movement and transition can also help wiggly kids.
- **Rotate the centers.** Alternately, keep the families in the same spot throughout the session and have them work through multiple centers in place. This could work well if you have everyone work on the same center at the same time. Simply pass out one center at a time.

You also have two options for managing the rotations:

- **Self-paced.** Allow each family to work at their own speed and move on to the next activity whenever they are ready. Even if you take this approach, you may want to make some announcements along the way to encourage families to keep moving (e.g. "If you haven't moved on to your second activity yet, you might want to wrap up your first").
- **Scheduled.** Tell your group that everyone will move to the next activity at the same time. Give a 1-2 minute warning and let families know that they can always take the activities home to complete them. You may want to use a bell to get everyone's attention.

Passports

If you choose the option of rotating families through the activities, consider using “passports” to add a little motivation and make the event a bit more fun. Here's how it works:

- **Give each child a passport.** This will simply be a sheet of paper, perhaps folded, which lists the activities, grade level (if varied), locations (if varied), and an empty space. See an example below, for use with one of our *Fall Learning Center* events.
- **Provide stamps at each activity.** Have a different self-inking stamp at each activity, and have the leader or parent stamp the passport when the family completes the activity. You can purchase Christian-themes stamps, but any kind of stamp will do.

Learning about Mary: Passport

<i>Activity</i>	<i>Grades</i>	<i>Location</i>	<i>Stamp</i>
❶ When Mary Was a Little Girl – Learn about how life would have been different for Mary when she grew up.	K-5	1 st grade classroom	
❷ Mary's Heart – Learn about the Immaculate Heart of Mary, how Mary wore her heart “on the outside,” and how we can too!	K-8	2 nd grade classroom	
❸ Our Lady, Undoer of Knots – We can often get stuck in our lives. Learn how to ask Mary to help us untie the knots in our lives!	K-8	3 rd grade classroom	
❹ Our Lady of Guadalupe – Hear the story of when Mary appeared in Mexico and performed a miracle!	3-8	4 th grade classroom	
❺ The Rosary – Learn how to pray this famous prayer to Mary and what it means.	3-8	5 th grade classroom	
❻ Prayer Scrolls – Learn about the Mary prayer wall in Ephesus, and make your own special prayer scroll.	3-8	Library	
❼ How Would You Describe Mary? - Identify Mary's virtues, your virtues, and virtues you want to work on.	3-8	Media room	

Preparing Your Catechists

Whole family events require catechists to assume new roles. When planning, decide who will lead the music and prayer, proclaim any scripture reading, etc.

Also prepare several “roaming catechists” who will be available to coach the parents during the family sharing time. Roaming catechists are “extras” in the room who keep an eye on what’s happening and can step in if a family seems to be lost or having trouble.

- ▶ They should be very discreet and limit their interventions to the minimum. In general, it’s best to allow family groups to work their own way through these exercises. Choose people who can be subtle and gentle with folks. Avoid those who tend to say too much.
- ▶ All leaders should carefully read through the event outline and all the learning center pages well in advance, and be familiar with the theology of the topic.
- ▶ Ask all your volunteers to arrive 15 minutes early, in order to be ready to welcome all the participants as they arrive. They should keep introducing people to one another as new people arrive.

And a Special Thank You!

We're very appreciative of you taking the lead in welcoming your parents and bringing them into the faith formation process. Your ministry will make a difference in these families' lives for years to come. It's an honor to support and equip pastoral leaders like you!