



## Learn how to Coach Parents to form their own children in Faith

Bill Huebsch

We used to call it “catechism class” and it consisted mainly of memorizing answers to questions in the *Baltimore Catechism*. After Vatican II, we called it “CCD” and it was much more interactive. Lately we’ve been calling it “religious education” and using weighty textbooks with lesson plans and tests. But now we’re calling it “catechesis” and it’s a lifelong process. We’ve learned in all this that we must coach parents in order to help them take the lead role in forming their own children. Bill Huebsch explains.

**It was a typical Wednesday evening** at the parish church. Gloria Jackson was preparing to meet her sixth-grade class for religious ed. This was the third class session out of twenty-four and, coincidentally, the third class session in Gloria’s short career as a volunteer catechist. Her’s was a large suburban parish and, because there were so many volunteer catechists, only those with problems received attention from the parish staff. Gloria was pretty much on her own with the sixth grade.

In the first two sessions, Gloria had managed to get through all the material in the appropriate chapter of her textbook. She also managed not to start a riot in the sixth grade! Of these two things she was proud. But she had some lingering doubts about what she was doing. For one thing, the kids didn’t seem to *enjoy* her religion class very much. They didn’t seem engaged with the material, didn’t seem to care one way or the other about all these eternal truths the text was talking about. She thought maybe they even *dreaded* religious ed.

But Gloria dutifully prepared for the third class and was ready when the kids arrived. This week's chapter was on "the fall from grace" in the Garden of Eden. It was cleverly entitled "How They Blew It!"



Jesse was one of Gloria's students. She was in sixth grade at Hubert Humphrey Middle School, a bright student who spent a lot of time working on the Internet for her science projects. She dreamed of being a doctor when she grew up. She liked helping sick people.

Jesse's parents were raised in the 1970s and attended "CCD classes" in their parish when they were young. CCD then consisted mainly of banner making and "youth chats." They also held "soul Masses" with drums and guitars. All in all, there just wasn't a lot of content in their religious education. They're Catholic now but not very involved at the parish, so Jesse gets dropped off on Wednesday evenings for Gloria's class. They don't talk much about religion at home. It just never comes up.

Jesse was paying close attention that night as Gloria marched right through the lesson, teaching that "death came into the world through sin." She used the notes in the teacher's guide which led her to article #402 from the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. Because of the first sin, Adam and Eve were forced to work for their food and endure pain in childbirth, she taught. Jesus, she went on to tell them, was born to save us from this sin and lead us back to Paradise.

At this point, Jesse raised her hand and Gloria called on her. "Miss Jackson," Jesse began, "death *didn't* come into the world through *sin*. The dinosaurs died, Miss Jackson. That's where oil comes from. There's been death in the world for millions of years; humans have only lived here a little bit of that time. And, Miss Jackson, people have *always* worked for their food, and even animals have pain during childbirth. And if Jesus saved us from this, then why do people still die?"

"Now where did you learn all that?" Gloria asked. She had finally gotten a response from a student, but it wasn't what she had been hoping for.

"On the Internet," Jesse replied. "Everyone knows it's true."

At the back of her mind, Gloria realized that this little girl, who was lecturing her on paleontology, might know more than she did. Gloria panicked just a little and, feeling herself become warm, told Jesse that this is all "a matter of faith," not science. "Adam and Eve lived in the Garden of Paradise. They really did. You have to believe that," she said. "And as for Jesus, don't you believe in Jesus?" she asked.

At which point Gloria turned the page and went on to teach about the story of Cain and Abel.

But Jesse wasn't finished. "Excuse me, Miss Jackson," she interrupted. "I don't think it's fair to use God to explain things we don't understand," she said.

### **A new day**

Everyone in this story lives in a world that is very different from anything the Church has ever known before. How we pass on the faith in this new world is a challenge for all four of these players: the children, the catechists, the families, and the rest of the parish.



**Today's students.** For her part, Jesse has more information available to her in one day, in one visit to the Internet, than was available in an entire lifetime to an adult in the seventeenth century. She experiences huge diversity of cultures, foods, languages, and ideas. Her experience of religion is equally diverse. Chances are she rubs shoulders every day with people of many other faiths. This is her culture. It all forms and affects her. It isn't possible to pretend otherwise.

**Today's parents.** Jesse's parents, for their part, probably haven't had any serious catechesis since their confirmation classes ended. They do not feel literate in their faith. And, like their daughter, they're living in a world rich in diversity and busy with many "secular" concerns. All of this is their culture and it, too, forms and affects them.

The biggest change for these parents is that, where once religion would have been a central force in their homes, for many today, it simply does not hold that place anymore. They live on the edge of parish life, many living outside the church's marriage norms, many married to non-Catholics, and many just not engaged with their parish, except when the children "need a sacrament."

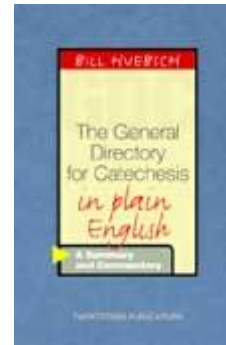
**Today's catechists.** And what about Gloria? She's a volunteer catechist who was most likely handed a complex, five-pound "teacher's edition" of the child's textbook, filled with a comprehensive treatment of Catholic doctrine and practice in each grade level. She probably had scant training to teach this material but is expected, nonetheless, to guide her learners through the mysteries of the faith, to witness to her own faith, and to use methods that will entrance the children! Sheesh! Who could do that?

These volunteer catechists do a great job in their parishes, and approach their ministry with generous hearts. They truly want the best for these children, and believe deeply in what they teach.

**Today's parish.** And as for the parish in which all this is happening, it probably approved yet another large religious education budget at this time last year. Its two largest lines were no doubt textbooks for the children and salaries for the staff who manage the program. The staff is probably overworked and underpaid and spends a lot of time recruiting volunteers, coordinating schedules, and making exceptions for kids who have soccer practice or dance recitals. At the same time, even though this parish knows how necessary it is, little or no time or attention or money is paid to adult education.

### A new approach

In 1998, Pope John Paul II and his advisors published the *General Directory for Catechesis*. It's the international guide for catechesis in the entire world. The GDC, as it's called, is meant to be adapted to each local culture. That process has been underway within the United States, and certain clear themes have emerged as diocesan leaders, catechists, pastors, and publishers have pored over the GDC looking for clues about how to proceed in this new environment.



Among other things, this document asks the catechetical enterprise of the Church to make an historic *shift*. The GDC says this in article 226.

The witness of Christian life

given by parents in the family  
comes to children with tenderness and power.

Thus, children grow up, living in the closeness of love,  
which is the closeness of God and Jesus,  
made plain by their parents

and this leaves its mark for the rest of their lives!

The childhood religious awakening which takes place

in the family  
is, simply, irreplaceable.

It is most powerful when parents take the time  
to explain to their children

the religious significance or meaning  
of events which occur

including holy days, family moments,  
and social, political or moral questions.

And this is made even more powerful

when parents connect it to the methodical catechesis  
their children receive at the parish program.

Indeed, we might say that “family catechesis

precedes...accompanies and enriches all forms of catechesis.”

## **Our Hearts Were Burning**

The U.S. Bishops, responding in part to this new direction in catechesis, in 1999 published their own pastoral plan for adult catechesis under the title “Our Hearts Were Burning Within Us.” They, too, see the necessity of making adult formation a more vital aspect for all members of the Church. Here’s what they said in article 6:

We, as the Catholic bishops of the United States, call the Church in our country to a renewed commitment to adult faith formation, positioning it at the heart of our catechetical vision and practice.

In 2005, the U.S. Bishops issued a *National Directory for Catechesis*, in which they reaffirm that “adult catechesis should be the *organizing principle*, which gives coherence to the various catechetical programs offered” (article 48, A).

Coaching parents to form their own children is a chief form of adult faith formation. As parents learn how to prepare their own children for a sacrament or to understand a faith lesson, they themselves grow and are evangelized.

## **The Heart of the Matter**

What the U.S. Bishops, the Pope and his advisors, and all the rest of us finally understand is that a children’s religious education program that isn’t situated within a community of well-formed adults won’t work. One really can’t expect a child with an hour of religious education per week for 24 weeks each year to grow in faith if the adults in that child’s life aren’t steeped in the faith too.

Religious education, in other words, isn’t just for kids anymore. It’s for all of us! It’s a life-long process, not connected in any way to the period of one’s schooling. It fits into everyday life and is not separate from the joys and sorrows, the griefs and anxieties we all face. It flows from our shared worship for which we assemble every Sunday. And it is the key to human happiness for us all. It’s the Good News we believe. Rather than being seen as a burden, a well-fashioned religious education program that coaches young parents will succeed.

## **New Thinking**

What all of this means is that we are involved in a new day in catechesis and religious education. Parish and school budgets are reflecting this new direction. Parish and school personnel are shifting to “more suitably balance the need for adult catechesis with that of children.” Bold experiments are taking place in parishes across the nation; leaders in adult formation circles are encouraging more.

“New ideas are emerging,” says Brian Lemoi, a member of the National Advisory Committee on Adult Religious Education, and Director of the Office of Evangelization and Lifelong Faith Formation in the Diocese of St. Petersburg.

“People from coast to coast are waking up to the wisdom of the Bishops’ pastoral plan,” he said.

### Try This At Home

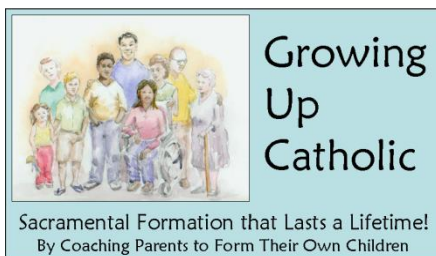
And what are some of these new ideas? How can we move from a children’s-only approach to a more total parish approach?

**Coach parents to form their own kids.** What if every parent with a child in catechesis or religious education was coached by the parish catechists to take a direct role in forming his or her or their own children? No one could imagine the catechumenate proceeding without a one-on-one sponsor for every learner. Just imagine if *every* parent with a child in religious education was coached to play a similar role. It could change the face of catechesis within a month.

It’s up to us to change the expectations we have of parents, but also to change the expectations parents have of us at the parish. They expect us to form their child in the faith, while they go off and run errands during class. They expect us to prepare their child for an adult life of faith. But wait. What’s wrong in this picture? Even if we thought we could, in 20 hours a year, provide such formation, isn’t faith formation the first responsibility of the parents?

Realizing many parents aren’t prepared to offer even minimal formation, parishes have begun coaching them to take a more central role. This word, coach, is a key one. Parents like being coached and respond to it with enthusiasm.

One parish director who is doing this told me recently that coaching parents is the sole method she is using to help young couples and single parents realize that catechesis is their responsibility.



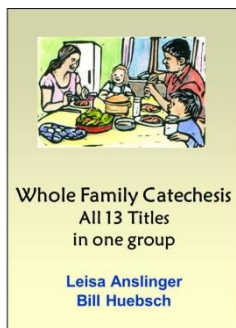
**Growing Up Catholic** was designed with just this very thing in mind. If every second-grade child was formed by his or her parents, even if they aren’t both Catholic, it would be formation that lasts a lifetime!

**Hint: they are being formed by their parents  
whether we like it or not,  
so why not coach the parents to do a better job?**

For more on this, read *Great Expectations: A Pastoral Guide to Partnering with Parents*, available at [www.PastoralPlanning.com](http://www.PastoralPlanning.com).

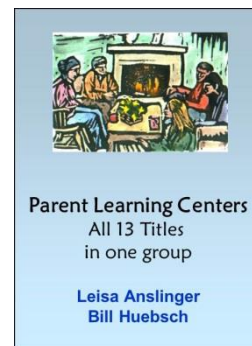
**Use other methods to add to your classroom approach.** It might also help if the format we follow in our children's programs was expanded from the use of a classroom-style setting, to include other kinds of gatherings, such as the intergenerational ones many parishes now use.

Many parishes today are changing all of this. They're adding occasional gatherings that happen in a larger room with round tables. The "learners" sit at these tables accompanied by as many of their parents as possible. A lead catechist who has the *gift* of teaching, and is very well prepared each week, leads the catechetical process. She or he **coaches parents** through times of faith-sharing, times of learning the doctrine, and activities, to make it all real. They mix excellent catechesis with group prayer and music.



Outlines for these kinds of gatherings, which we call **Whole Family Catechesis**, are available at [www.PastoralPlanning.com](http://www.PastoralPlanning.com).

Another option is to offer parents their own set of "learning centers" while their kids are in religious education classes. Such learning centers offer parents an array of choices, but they move along quickly and offer parents a host of take-home materials. Outlines for these **Learning Centers for Parents** are also available very affordably on the web site.

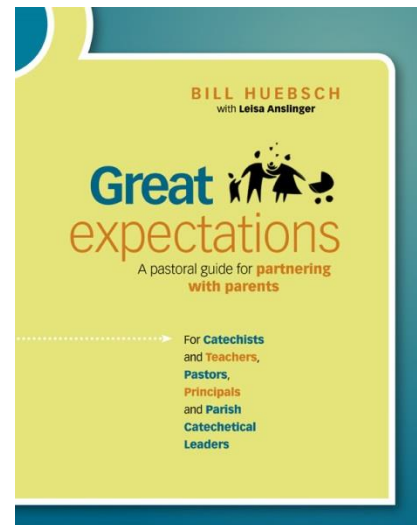


Added to that, we have learned that it is necessary to offer parents shorter bits of coaching on a variety of Catholic topics, to help them learn how to talk to their children about faith. In today's world, these young parents are busy! They're on the run every day! So providing resources designed to be used while on the run makes perfect sense. You can find such quick **resources for busy parents** on the web site as well.



These fliers for busy parents deal with life issues, individual Bible stories, the lives of the Saints, how to grab a sacred moment with your child on the way home from soccer practice, and many other topics. They're quite ingenious and

all reproducible.



### **The Bottom Line**

Try to imagine how different things would have gone in that Wednesday evening religious education class with Gloria and Jesse if some of these new ideas were in place. What if all this had happened in a larger room with other learners and more shared energy? What if Jesse's parents had been there as her fellow learners? What if one of the exercises of the night was to find a way of speaking about these eternal truths in a language that fits our culture?

What if Jesse and her parents—and even Gloria— all saw themselves as “learners” who were coming to know Jesus and to love the Church? What if the goal was to *understand* but also to *encounter* Christ along the way? What if all this catechetical activity were seen in that parish as a chiefly adult activity shared with the children, rather than the other way around?

The bottom line is that we hold the secret to the Reign of God. It's been entrusted to us by Christ himself, guarded by the Holy Spirit working through the faithful people of the Church, and now ours to share with one another and hand on to the next generation. The *General Directory* is right: it *isn't* just for kids. It's for all of us!

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