



A PASTORAL LETTER ON

HOMESCHOOLING

WITH DIOCESAN STATUTES

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One of the most serious responsibilities of a bishop is that of teaching the faith. In recent years, we have been blessed with a series of documents which have called the whole Church to a deeper understanding of the art, science and holy ministry of religious instruction, more properly called catechesis.

Always in first place, there is the command of Christ who, before ascending into heaven, entrusted to the apostles the command to make disciples of all nations and “to proclaim to humanity what they had heard, what they had seen with their eyes, what they had looked upon and touched with their hands.” (Pope John Paul II Apostolic Constitution *Catechesi Tradendae* 1) This mission is always before us, and is before the Bishop in a special way.

In our own time, we have had the example of that exemplary catechist, Pope John Paul II, who, at the very beginning of his pontificate, entrusted to the Church this ministry that he, himself, had embraced as a young priest.

“Catechesis has always been a central care in my ministry as a priest and as a Bishop.” (*Catechesi Tradendae* 4) During his pontificate, he presented us with the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, which he described as a “sure norm for teaching the faith,” as well as a “sure and authentic text for preparing local catechists.” (Pope John Paul II, Apostolic Constitution: *Fidei Depositum* 3 on the Publication of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*)

In our diocese, with the help of a grant from Our Sunday Visitor, there have been extensive programs of preparation of catechists for, without well-trained teachers, the documents will not come alive. One initiative, linked originally to the University of Dayton and more recently to the Theology Department at the University of Notre Dame, leads to a Master of Arts in Theology. Many of these graduates teach in the two-year certification program, Education for Ministry. Also funded by Our Sunday Visitor and facilitated by the Office of Catechesis, the Education for Ministry begins a new program each Fall in both Fort Wayne and South Bend. Home-schooling parents have found this very advantageous to their role as catechists to their children.

It is important before speaking of a particular form of catechesis to understand clearly the purpose of catechesis.

“Accordingly, the definitive aim of catechesis is to put people not only in touch but in communion, in intimacy with Jesus Christ: only He can lead us to the Father in the Spirit and make us share in the life of the Holy Trinity.” Pope John Paul II, *Catechesis Tradendae* 5

This Christocentric purpose of catechesis is central. It binds all of us – bishop, priest, and those who teach in Catholic schools or programs of religious instruction. It also binds parents. Thus, in prayer and personal communion with Jesus Christ, as well as in reading and study, the catechist finds the source of this ministry in Christ.

“We must therefore say that in catechesis it is Christ, the Incarnate Word and Son of God, who is taught – everything else is taught with reference to Him – and it is Christ alone who teaches – anyone else teaches to the extent that he is Christ’s spokesman, enabling Christ to teach with his lips.”

“Every catechist should be able to apply to himself the mysterious words of Jesus: ‘My teaching is not mine, but his who sent me’.” Pope John Paul II, *Catechesi Tradendae* 6

All catechists, then, are called to present a word that is not their own but one that they have received, accepted and believed. Through prayer and study, they grow in their ability to teach the faith that comes from Christ. Indeed, they are teaching Christ Himself, and their communion with Him, with His teaching and with His Church remains always the source of their instruction.

HOME-BASED CATECHESIS

In our country, there has arisen the phenomenon called “home-schooling” or, as referred to in the National Directory of Catechesis, “home-based Catechesis.” In preparing these guidelines, I have consulted on two occasions with our Presbyteral Council and sought the advice of our priests, as is my obligation. I also met with a group of parents who believe in and practice home-based catechesis.

In addition, one of our priests, Father Mark Gurtner, JCL, has written his licentiate thesis in canon law on this subject, and I have con-

sulted with him and read his dissertation.

I have also consulted closely with our Office of Catechesis and with the director of this office, Sister Jane Carew, an experienced catechist, known for her leadership in the formation of catechists.

THE NEED FOR COLLABORATION AND HARMONY

The goal of all must be a harmonious and collaborative effort for the child. Always the child. He or she is the recipient of the Word of God. It is the Word of God, and the child receiving the Word of God, that must always be before us. We must honor the right of the child to receive sound catechesis. The right of Christ to see that the child receives sound and comprehensive instruction in full communion with Church teaching must also be honored and given the first place.

Then there is the right of parents. As the primary educators of their children, parents have the right and duty to choose the kind of educational environment that they determine best suits their children's educational needs.

“If Catholic parents choose to provide catechesis for the children in their home, the catechesis must be both complete and authentic. The bishop of the diocese, the pastor of the parish, the parents and children, all have God-given responsibilities that must be respected and considered in home-based catechesis.

The home-based catechesis of children is a cooperative effort between the children, their parents, parish leadership and the diocesan bishop. Parents who choose to be not only the primary educators of their children but also their catechists must adhere to all guidelines for catechists as outlined by the diocesan bishop.” *National Directory of Catechesis 61.3*

The Church always respects the rights of the parents as the first educators. Parents also must respect the right and obligation of the bishop to oversee and guide the catechetical instruction. The bishop is the primary catechist in the diocese. His mission comes from Christ and the apostles to preach the Gospel to every creature, and also to see that the faith is taught accurately in his diocese.

The local pastor, while always recognizing the right of parents to teach the faith to their own children, has the serious responsibility of

overseeing the catechesis of all the children in his parish at every stage and, in particular, determining if they are properly prepared for First Penance, Eucharist and Confirmation.

While it may never be made a condition for reception of First Penance, First Holy Communion and Confirmation, I strongly encourage all parents who catechize at home to see that their children participate in the parish program for reception of these Sacraments. In entrusting their children to the parish, they are making an act of ecclesial faith. The parish will be richer for their collaboration, and the families will also be drawn more fully into the life of the parish, which Pope John Paul II called "A Family of Families." The Church is a community. It is the Body of Christ, and the presence of the children who are being home-schooled in the preparation for reception of the Sacraments, while not a requirement for the reception of the Sacraments, should always be strongly encouraged.

Those who are schooled at home can contribute and add to the work being done in the parish while coming in contact with priests, the catechetical leader and other children who will also enrich them spiritually. It is also true that the presence of those who are catechized at home will strengthen and enrich those in the catechetical programs in the parish.

"Since the celebration of the sacraments continually integrates children into the Body of Christ, preparing children for reception of the sacraments should always be undertaken in collaboration with the local pastor and catechetical leaders."

National Directory for Catechesis 61. 3

RESPONSIBILITIES OF THE PASTOR

The pastor, in close communion with the Bishop, has the responsibility to see that all the children in his parish are properly catechized and prepared for the Sacraments. At all stages, but particularly at the time of preparation of the Sacraments, he must, through his own efforts assisted by others, be sure that the children have a sound and proper understanding of the Sacrament which is to be received.

Parents who intend to home school should present themselves and identify themselves to the pastor at the beginning of the first grade. If one parent is non-Catholic, that parent should also be made

welcome. At this meeting with the pastor or his delegate, parents should share with the priests the methods they are choosing to employ and the texts they will be using.

The same procedure should be used for the Sacrament of Confirmation. Those who are home-schooling should meet with the pastor or his delegate at the beginning of the year that Confirmation is normally received in the parish. At this meeting they should share with the pastor or delegate the methods they are choosing to employ and the text they are planning to use. The text should be consistent with the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* and should be among those texts approved by the Bishops Ad Hoc Committee to Oversee the Use of the Catechism.

CATECHETICAL GUIDELINES AND TEXTS

The diocese provides catechetical guidelines which indicate the content required at each of the grade levels. These guidelines precede textbooks which are a significant tool in the teaching of catechesis. The guidelines can be obtained from the parish catechetical leader.

The Diocesan Office of Catechesis recommends text books, but not just any text books. It recommends those which have gone through a review, under episcopal guidance, to determine if they are consistent with the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*.

I consider it preferable that parents employ the text used by the parish. As with any good catechist, they will strengthen this with their own examples and experience. Fidelity to Church teaching is assured by using texts consistent with the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* and approved by the Bishop.

The time before reception of First Penance, First Eucharist and Confirmation should be a sacred time. In most parishes before Confirmation, for example, there is a retreat which includes the opportunity for the Sacrament of Penance. Emphasis is placed on the needs of the poor and service to those in need. This has recently been emphasized by Pope Benedict XVI's encyclical, *God Is Love*.

“The Church cannot neglect the service of charity any more than she can neglect the Sacrament and the Word.” Pope Benedict XVI, *God Is Love 22*

While such initiatives cannot be required of home-schooled children as a condition for receiving the Sacrament of Confirmation, pas-

tors should explain these efforts to parents, and parents are strongly encouraged to see that their children participate. The National Directory makes clear the importance of such efforts as retreats and service projects: “children should be encouraged to participate in non-instructional preparatory activities of the parish peer group preparing for the sacrament.” *National Directory for Catechesis 61.3*

There should be a meeting between the home-schooling parent and the pastor or his catechetical leader a few months prior to the reception of the particular Sacrament. The main purpose of this meeting prior to reception of the Sacraments is to fulfill an obligation shared jointly, in different but similar ways, by the parents, who are the catechists in this case, and the pastor, who is also a catechist and who acts and teaches *in persona Christi* – in the person of Christ.

The parents should indicate the readiness of the child to receive the Sacrament in question. If they feel the child is not ready, they should give reasons for this. The pastor has the responsibility of determining the readiness of the child and may ask appropriate questions based on the diocesan catechetical outline for the Sacraments. If the pastor feels the child is not ready to receive the Sacrament, he must work with the parents to bring the child to this position. If the parents feel the child is not ready for the Sacrament, the pastor should offer whatever help is needed in order to bring about this readiness.

There is an ancient principle in the Church on matters like this. In Latin, it reads, *Sacramenta Propter Homines*. It can be translated, *Sacraments are for Human Beings*. So, every effort should be made to help the child move toward a state where he or she is ready for the Sacraments.

In general, the pastor is to make the spiritual richness of the parish available to the parents so they can best fulfill their catechetical duty.

As Bishop, I am very encouraged by the programs for training catechists in this diocese. Those who home-school are catechists, and are hereby encouraged to participate in every opportunity to form themselves and grow as catechists. This diocese offers a significant number of such opportunities, such as the following:

- Education for Ministry Program (two years of formation based on the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*)
- Special Formation Days and events for training catechists

I also recommend that home-schooling parents have their own copy of the *National Directory of Catechesis*. This is an excellent catechetical resource.

If it is the wish of the parents and their child, home-catechized children are to be included in solemn reception of First Holy Communion along with every other parish child. It would be wrong, for example, to say that those who are home schooled should receive at another time. They are also invited and encouraged to participate in the penance service in preparation for First Communion. Those to be confirmed are to receive this sacrament with the parish Confirmation class.

If conflicts should arise between parents and the pastor concerning the implementation of these norms, they can be avoided if kindness and understanding are present between pastors and home-schooling parents. If such a conflict continues, the matter may be referred to the regional vicar.

The instruction of children in the home from the youngest age remains a great blessing in the Catholic Church. Most of us were home schooled from the moment when our parents knelt down with us at night and taught us to pray, make the Sign of the Cross, brought us to church to show us the Christmas crib, explained the crucifix and pointed out the place and meaning of the tabernacle and the sanctuary lamp. Here we have the Church at its catechetical best - the parent in the home teaching in a loving way; the parish church and its Christian art; and the living icon, the parish priest – fulfilling their responsibilities in love, respecting each other and concerned with one thing above everything else, that the child learn about Jesus Christ and believe in Him.

All parents are setting a solid example for their children when they instruct them in the truths of the faith in their home from the very beginning, but also join them to the community of the parish church. The same Christ who is present in the home greets and touches the child in the parish church. What is needed is kindness, love and understanding on both sides. Parents should look to the

guidance of their pastors and welcome it in helping them live their Christian vocation. Pastor and parents together are obliged to embrace the vision of the local bishop, which must always be rooted in the Scriptures, the teachings of the Church and, in recent times, the Catechism of the Catholic Church and related texts of national and international directories for catechesis. Pastors should respect and offer guidance to parents who are instructing their children at home.

The *National Catholic Directory for Catechesis* states:

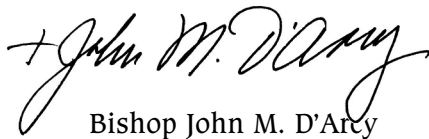
“Since their children are being initiated into the life of the Church which is fundamentally realized in the local parish, parents who provide catechesis for children in their homes should participate fully in the life of the parish.” *National Directory of Catechesis 61.3*

A CONCLUDING WORD

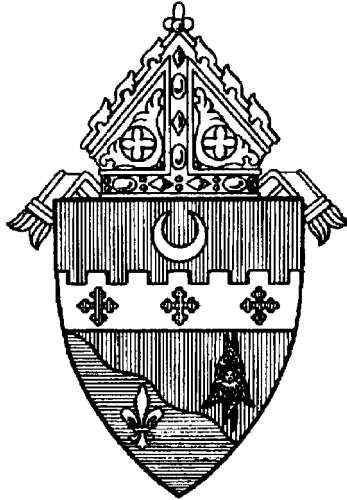
I recently visited the grave of Saint Elizabeth Ann Seton. This extraordinary woman represents a fine patroness for both parish-based and home-based catechesis. She taught the faith to her own children. I also saw the rock on top of a high hill on which it is said she sat while giving religious instruction to the children of the parish.

I ask her prayerful intercession and that of the great catechist, Pope John Paul II, that all our children may learn the faith of the Church and live it all their lives.

I hereby promulgate these Statutes and this Pastoral Letter on August 15, 2006, the Solemnity of the Assumption. They will be effective as particular law for the Diocese of Fort Wayne – South Bend on September 15, 2006.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "John M. D'Arcy". The signature is written in a cursive style with a cross at the beginning.

Bishop John M. D'Arcy



Promulgated by Bishop John M. D'Arcy
on the Solemnity of the Assumption
of the Blessed Virgin Mary, August 15, 2006

Diocese of Fort Wayne-South Bend
diocesefwsb.org

Cover photo is of the statue at St. Elizabeth Ann Seton Parish,
Fort Wayne, established in 1988.