

# NOTRE DAME STUDY OF CATHOLIC PARISH LIFE

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## Report No. 14

### CATECHESIS, RELIGIOUS EDUCATION, AND THE PARISH

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## *Historical Overview*

Since the first explorers arrived on the shores of America, catechesis (i.e., religious instruction in the Gospel, the Good News about the mystery of God and the plan of salvation) has been an on-going process in the American churches and culture. Already in the 16th and 17th centuries Spanish and French missionaries were involved with teaching American Indians the principles of the Catholic faith. Following successive generations of English settlement, many private schools and academies were established for children. These schools reflected various sectarian traditions. Religious communities such as the Jesuits, Franciscans, and Ursulines were early leaders in developing such schools for Catholics.

As state church and non-conformist Protestants from England expanded the villages into small cities, the predecessors of “public” schools developed; they included religious instruction as part of the common program. But the conflicts of the Old World placed Catholics outside the Protestant common-school consensus. So America's first Catholic bishop, John Carroll of Baltimore, was quite interested in religious instruction directed specifically to Catholics in this new nation. The parochial school system, Catholic colleges and universities, and an American version of the Confraternity of Christian Doctrine can, to some extent, trace their origins to his concern.

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, it was difficult to speak of public school systems as we know them nowadays. From the 1830s to the 1850s many states organized such systems out of the common schools. The Bill of Rights had been ratified in 1791 and its "separation of church and state" clause was adopted in part because of interdenominational rivalries over the teaching of religion in the common schools. According to historians of religious education such as Robert Lynn, C. Ellis Nelson, James Hastings Nichols, Sidney Mead, and Joseph B. Collins, the prominent educators of that time directed denominations to take responsibility for the catechesis of their own children and gradually moved religious instruction off the school curriculum. Yet, according to John Westerhoff, an estimated 80% of children educated in public schools from 1836 to 1900 read from *McGuffey's Readers*, with textual material drawn from Calvinist theology, Bible lessons and prayers. Thus, although the public school system was officially non-denominational, it was no surprise that even Protestant bodies established Sunday schools, and Catholics and some Lutherans developed parochial schools.

As the 19th century wore on and Catholic immigration increased, the Roman Catholic Church in the United States continued to place great emphasis upon religious instruction. In 1885 the *Baltimore Catechism* joined numerous other instructional materials available for catechetical purposes. These materials were published in English, as well as all the other languages spoken by the newly arriving immigrants. Although its early critics were legion and by 1918 seventy-two new catechisms had been published, the *Baltimore Catechism* became the dominant text for catechesis for the United States until shortly before Vatican II. Nevertheless, according to Mary Charles Bryce, when the

revised edition of the Baltimore Catechism appeared in 1941, there were 109 catechisms in use and 95% of them carried bishops' imprimaturs. Perhaps because such catechisms were driven by zeal for the truth and effective teaching in different cultures, pluralism was evident early in written catechetical materials. It is not a post-Vatican II phenomenon.

The latter part of the 19th century also saw the emergence of the school as a basic instrument of catechesis for the Catholic parish. In 1884, the Third Plenary Council of Baltimore specified that all parishes should build such a school near their churches. And, taking it one step further, the Council required that all Catholic parents send their children to these schools. Thus the massive building of parochial schools commenced and continued well into the twentieth century. Many of these schools remain today as the strength of parochial education in America. Yet, despite the 1884 Council's hopes, only a little above half of all parishes, give or take 10%, had a parochial school operating at any given point in U.S. history.

### *Confraternity of Christian Doctrine*

During the twentieth century, the Church in the United States once again looked at catechesis beyond the walls of the parochial schools. By the early twentieth century, church leaders began to recognize that settlement patterns of Catholics in the United States had gone well beyond the dominant urban centers to the very remote areas of this nation. These rural Catholic families had very few, if any, opportunities to send their children to parochial schools.

During the 1920's and early 1930's, Father Edwin V. O'Hara, observed that something had to be done to reach these families in the remote rural areas with religious education for their children. Following service as a diocesan education executive in Oregon, O'Hara organized the Catholic Rural Life Bureau of the National Catholic Welfare Conference, which soon merged into the National Catholic Rural Life Conference. He saw in the Confraternity of Christian Doctrine (CCD) an instrument to reach rural children with uniform courses on doctrine and life. (CCD was not new to the United States, having existed in some European countries for three centuries and in some U.S. dioceses since the turn of the century.) O'Hara was appointed Bishop of Great Falls, MT, in 1930 and quickly established a CCD program in every parish. CCD now spread rapidly following his diocesan model. By 1935 the U.S. Bishops established an independent national office of the Confraternity with Bishop O'Hara as its chairman. In 1939, he was named Bishop of Kansas City and the Confraternity gradually expanded beyond the needs of rural parishes to include both rural and urban parishes nationwide.

### *Pluralism and Catechesis*

Just as in the 19th century when American church leaders faced the difficult task of serving people of many nations and languages, so today the American Catholic Church is a microcosm of the world. Eastern Rite Catholics were among the first to incorporate their unique religious and cultural traditions into instructional materials. Now, with the new

migrations from Latin America, East and Southeast Asia, the diversity of cultures in the United States continues to be a challenge as those in catechetics work to instill common elements of faith to be shared by all members of the Church.

In addition to the diversity of race, ethnicity and culture, diversity exists from region to region of the Church. The culture in the South is not that of the Northeast. An ordinary reassigned from the East Coast to the Rockies or from New England to New Orleans will find very different church cultures. Even within a single region the lifestyles differ. Urban Atlanta differs considerably from rural Mississippi and rural Mississippi from Appalachia.

Add to those differences the questions of age-group differences, along with issues of illiteracy, poverty, and isolation. Looking at all of these variables one can begin to appreciate the complexity in the development and delivery systems for catechesis in the United States. Acculturation of the local customs and circumstances may be as diverse as the number of parishes in this nation. It is a vexing problem for a church body accustomed to thinking of itself hierarchically as responsible for the propagation of the “one true faith.”

### *Sharing the Light of Faith*

To respond to this diversity the Bishops of the United States set in motion the preparation of a national directory. Applying the principles and guidelines of the General Catechetical Directory from Vatican II, a document emerged called *Sharing the Light of Faith: National Catechetical Directory for Catholics of the United States*. This document was published in 1979 and has served since that time as the guidelines for catechesis in the United States.

The Directory made normative “the teaching of the Church in regard to revelation and the Christian message.” In paragraph 47 this “hierarchy of truths” was outlined. Beyond theological elaborations of the Gospel message, the Directory recognized that catechesis is a life-long activity nurtured through the ministries of word, worship (including prayer and sacrament), and service, and is developed in Christian community.

It was through the consultative process of developing this Directory that “catechesis” came to be the preferred term to describe the process of education for the faith in this country. The purpose of catechesis is to make a person's "faith become living, conscious and active, through the light of instruction. " (paragraph 32) To that end the Directory offered insights into effective learning and organization for catechesis.

Catechists soon recognized that the Directory compelled increased emphasis on adult Christian education. But the forms of such education were so varied and were sufficiently different from sacramental catechesis, that many catechists now prefer the term "adult religious education" to describe a large part of their work. In the 1986 document, *Serving Life and Faith: Adult Religious Education and the American Catholic*

*Community*, published by the Department of Education, U.S. Catholic Conference, the assumption behind such expanded catechesis is stated this way: “. . . any activity sponsored by the Christian community that is aimed at attaining human wholeness is religious and, therefore, the work of the Church.” (paragraph 21) What the blending of catechesis with religious education recognizes is that the Christian life is of whole cloth: doctrine, sacrament, worship, community and service occur not only in the church on Sunday and in class on Wednesday or Saturday, but at work, in the home, in government and economy and leisure, Monday through Saturday. Catechesis and religious education, then, take place in both formal and informal ways: they derive not only from what we teach, but how we as a Catholic community worship and live.

### *Data Sources*

Accordingly, this report on catechesis and religious education in the parish addresses far more than parochial schools, CCD, sacramental catechesis, and adult classes. It relies on three data sources: (1) the 1099 scientifically selected parishes who responded to a survey of parish demographics, programs, staff and leadership characteristics, (2) the 2667 parishioners selected through scientific sampling procedures in 36 representative parishes across the country, (3) the staff members in those 36 parishes. Many references to catechesis, religious education and the parish have been made in previous reports of this Study. Those findings will be used in this report in order to offer an overview of catechesis, religious education and the parish in the United States. The reader should not look to Report 14 for intensive studies of parochial schools, directors of religious education, youth ministry, or other institutions and actors involved in parish religious education. Those have been done better in studies conducted by church professional associations or other scholars. Rather, this Report attempts to portray the range of approaches to catechesis and religious education that exist within American parishes and to suggest some of their successes and shortcomings.

### *Specific Forms of Catechesis*

As we discuss the various forms of catechetical ministry in the U.S. parishes, it is important to remember that every pastoral activity has a catechetical dimension. While the Directory offered guidelines, it did not limit the range of catechetical programs. The data show that the components of any given program are designed to reflect local audiences and circumstances.

Catechesis and religious education are no longer synonymous with young children or teenagers. Today the Church is attempting to reach out to all age groups with programs designed to enrich individuals both personally and spiritually. That is to be expected in a church body where most of its ethnic groups have surpassed national averages for the proportion of people completing higher education. Educated Catholics seek the same growth in faith and understanding of traditions as they have experienced in their secular educations. Further, in a church body where the numbers of ordained clergy and religious

are tailing off or dropping precipitously while the numbers of Catholics are growing, Catholic lay persons and clerical leaders alike recognize that more parish responsibilities will need to be shared. Religious education becomes essential for the new generation of non-ordained Catholic leadership. Finally, service to the extra-parish community — living the life of the faithful — requires constant encouragement. Recalling that our Lord instructed us that “by our fruits we shall be known,” community service becomes both evidence of successful instruction in the Gospel and itself a compelling instruction to others.

In addition to a discussion of youth catechesis, then, this report will also examine adult catechesis and religious education, sacramental catechesis, Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults (RCIA), liturgy and catechesis, catechesis and the parochial school, parish staff perspectives on catechesis, and community as formal and informal catechesis.

### *Catechesis, Religious Education, and the Young*

The parish-connected Catholics sampled from the 36 representative parishes show considerable diversity of opinion and belief on Church issues. On one topic, however, they show remarkably similar feelings — that topic is religious education for the young.

As was reported in Report 4 the respondents were presented with the following question: “Given limited resources within your parish, toward which of the following activities should the parish direct much of its attention?” Table 1 offers a priority ranking ranging from I to 5; the higher the score, the higher the priority attached to the activity. Their primary choice revolved around enhancing the religious education of the young.

As the responses show, attention to religious education of teenagers ranks as the most compelling need in parish activities. Not surprising, in the 36 parishes from which the sample of respondents was drawn, all 36 parishes have some type of catechesis for pre-teens and teenagers. These programs are either parochial schools or CCD programs, or both.

**Table 1**  
**Parishioners' Priorities among Parish Activities**

<u>Activity</u>	<u>Priority Ranking</u>
Enhancing religious education of:	-
Pre-teens	3.88
Teenagers	4.04
Adults	3.64
Making converts and/or reclaiming church dropouts	3.70
Helping poor people within the parish	3.82
Helping poor people outside the parish	3.26
Improving liturgy	3.40
Improving the social life of the parish	3.33
Improving contacts with non-Catholic churches within our neighborhood	3.33
Working to change unjust socioeconomic conditions	3.25

To further support how adults perceive the need to provide catechesis, both formal and informal, for the youth in their parishes let us look at how parishioners view their parish as a primary source to meet this need.

In Report 8 the author reviews literature on the purposes of parishes and reports that parishioners were asked the following question: “At one time, it is said, people turned to their parish or priest for help on all sorts of things. Nowadays many parishes do not provide such help or people prefer to seek help elsewhere. They turn to friends, special agencies, or professionals outside of the parish. Here is a list of personal needs or family problems.” The types of problems are shown in Table 2.

Respondents were first asked to list which source for help they would approach — (1) friends, (2) pastor and/or parish staff, or (3) professionals or agencies outside the parish — for each problem. Then, for those respondents who had selected the third option (professionals outside the parish) for a problem, they were asked whether it was “likely” or “unlikely” that they would use such a service if competent help were available in the parish.

The first three columns of Table 2 show the percentage of parishioners who would turn for help to each source. The total across these three columns for each problem does not equal 100% because some parishioners did not see this as a relevant problem in their life; such non-responses fluctuated between 6 and 19 percent. Less than 1 % of the respondents indicated they turn to more than one source for help on any given problem, and they are also excluded from the table. The fourth column is derived by adding the

proportion who would turn to their parish staff for help if such help were available. This figure is always larger than the figure in the first column. The fifth column represents the differences between the fourth and first columns. This has been identified as an “opportunity gap”. The larger the gap, the more it suggests that people consider parish staff as appropriate people to help them deal with a problem, but that they would not turn to them presently because such help is not now available. The problems are listed, not in the order they appeared on the questionnaire, but by declining frequency of mentioning parish staff as the appropriate source for help.

**Table 2**  
**Sources of Help for Parishioners' Needs,**  
**2667 Parishioners in 36 Parishes**

<i>Problem</i>	<i>% of Respondents Who Would Turn For Help to:</i>			<i>If help were offered within parish,</i>	<i>“Opportunity Gap”</i>
	<i>Pastor, Parish Staff</i>	<i>Friends</i>	<i>Professionals Outside Parish</i>	<i>% turning to Pastor, Parish Staff</i>	
Religious education of children	84.4%	1.3%	1.8%	85.8%	1.4%
Religious education for myself	82.6	2.4	3.4	84.9	2.3
Support for faith	78.3	8.5	1.2	79.4	1.1
Premarital counseling or marital renewal	74.1	3.3	9.0	78.7	4.3
Counseling at time of sickness	53.0	18.1	19.3	63.6	10.6
Opportunities to serve others	47.9	21.3	18.3	60.2	12.3
Death of a member of my family	46.3	43.5	3.5	48.8	2.5
A place to express my doubts and fears without judgment	44.0	34.0	11.2	49.0	5.0
Severe marital problems	39.2	11.4	36.9	59.6	20.4
Family problems	36.5	24.2	26.3	51.0	14.5
Unwanted pregnancy	31.8	13.9	34.9	46.7	14.9
Handling of painful memories	30.4	42.5	16.0	38.7	8.3
Alcohol/drug abuse	13.3	7.2	67.3	49.9	36.6
Severe money problems	6.5	28.3	52.6	26.1	19.6
Unemployment	4.9	25.3	56.4	29.6	24.7

Once again, religious education or catechesis of children is the primary problem for which parishioners would turn to the pastor and/or parish staff for help. The fifth column there is evidence that programs for religious education for children have nearly exhausted their potential clientele; a parish either has in place sufficient services, or parishioners would probably not turn in greater numbers to the parish if it offered additional services. The opportunity gap is small.

A strong commitment to religious education for the young is not necessarily paralleled by adults' participation in religious education for themselves.

An ethnographer studying a suburban parish composed of highly-educated Catholics, reported the following: "The only religious education programs which thrive here are those attached to sacramental education — largely dominated by training of school-aged children. Religious education programs tailored to adults have largely flopped. This reflects the belief of Nash & Berger (1962, 1963) that suburbanites join religious organizations primarily for their children's religious education." Yet, as we will see later, it is the suburban churches that are most likely to have adult religious education programs and these are thought to be an important source of vitality. The paradox is that educated Catholics sense they need adult religious education programs in their parishes, but most continue to feel more comfortable with catechetical programs aimed at their children.

Youth ministry activities often have a catechetical dimension aimed at the young. Of the 1099 parishes included in this study, 62 % have organized youth ministry programs. The availability of programs varies greatly by locale. The large, affluent, well-educated suburban parishes almost always have youth ministry programs. Less than half of the smaller rural parishes have them. Perhaps because they have more rural parishes, the Midwest and Intermountain states are less likely to have youth programs, while the Middle Atlantic, New England, and Southern parishes are more likely to have them. Interestingly, youth ministry programs are more likely to appear in locales where Catholics constitute a distinct minority of the general population, as in the South. Perhaps the same factors that initiated Catholic schools at the time of the Third Plenary Council — Catholics feeling surrounded by a Protestant culture — are nowadays contributing to youth ministries, in the absence of a parochial school.

Another area in which youths participate directly in catechetical activities is that of sacramental preparation. This topic will be discussed in-depth later in this report.

### *Adult Catechesis and Religious Education*

Since the time of the Second Vatican Council there has been an unprecedented move to bring adult catechesis and religious education to the forefront. As the Directory describes it, adult catechesis is "the summit of the entire catechetical enterprise — it stands at the center of the Church's educational mission." (paragraph 40, *Sharing the Light of Faith*) As the Church views adult catechesis, it is the way to help adults

themselves grow to maturity of faith. *Serving Life and Faith* offers three goals for religious education aimed at adults: (1) “By coming to a better knowledge of God— Father, Son and Spirit — adults are better enabled to express their faith in action” (paragraph 34); (2) “. . .adult religious education helps prepare believers to exercise a prophetic voice in today's world, to focus the light of the Gospel on the issues of our time” (paragraph 35); and (3) adult religious education helps the adult population live and model the faith for the young, thus providing an effective way for transmitting the “transforming message of Christ” to young people in a secularized world (paragraph 36).

Of those parishes in our sample of 1099, 63% report having an organized program in adult religious education. Opportunities for adult religious education are greatest along the middle and southern Atlantic seaboard and the Mountain states where 75 and 70 % of parishes, respectively, offer programs. In both of these regions Catholics constitute smaller minorities of the total population. In states where Catholics are more numerous, the Northeast and Midwest, only 59 and 62 % of the parishes, respectively, offer adult religious education. Availability of adult religious education is highest in the suburbs (75%), lowest in rural parishes (45%). Nevertheless, ethnic variations also occur. Formal programs in adult catechesis and religious education are most likely to be available in Black (86% ), Hispanic (71% ), and Irish parishes (69%), and least likely to be available in Polish and East European parishes.

When examined closely using the parishioner respondents, one finds some interesting results. Going back to Table I which showed Parishioners' Priorities among Parish Activities, the respondents gave the enhancement of adult religious education a mixed review. Three other priorities, youth religious education, helping the poor within the parish, and making converts outranked the priority for adult religious education. Perhaps that is why only 63 % of the parishes nationwide claim to have formal adult religious education programs.

In Table 2 on the Sources for Help for Parishioners' Needs, the need for religious education for themselves ranks second only to seeking help for religious education of their children. But the opportunity gap is nearly exhausted. This could be interpreted that either the parishes have in place sufficient services, or parishioners would probably not turn out in greater numbers to the parish if it offered this service. Perhaps these data help us to understand why, even in the affluent, educated suburban parishes where programs are in place, they are not flooded with adult participants.

To further investigate this anomaly we examine the participation levels in various parish activities. As cited earlier in Report 4, parishioners were asked to list the parish activities within which they participate. Just over half of the parishioners (52%) participate in no activities beyond Mass or other religious rites, 21% mention that they participate in one additional activity, 15% offer two, 8% mention three, and 6% list four or more. Table 3 shows the groupings of these activities. The first column shows what proportion of parishioners do at least one activity of this type; it does not total 100% because the same parishioners may engage in more than one type of activity. The second column shows the

proportion of times this type of activity is mentioned as a percentage of all activities mentioned.

**Table 3**  
**Participation in Types of Parish Activities, Parishioners Sample**

<i>Type of Activity</i>	<i>Proportion of Parishioners Involved</i>	<i>Proportion of Times This Activity Mentioned</i>
Social life, recreational	22 %	27 %
Lay liturgical roles, e.g. liturgy committee, choir, lector, communion minister	19	26
Education, evangelism	14	19
Governance, finance, administration, housekeeping	12	15
Devotional or personal renewal	6	8
Social action, welfare, justice	4	5
Participation in no activity	52	--

The data indicate that Catholics who do participate in parish activities — and 52 % do not — are more likely to prefer those activities of a social or recreational nature; next are those directly related to the liturgies; and thirdly, activities related to religious education. Of those adults participating in religious education programs, more are providing catechesis or religious education for the young than are involved in religious education aimed directly at their own level. To be sure, those who teach the young often gain new insights that affect their own faith and understanding.

Just as the catechesis of youth goes beyond formal “classes”, so too do activities in which adults may be involved. Of the organized programs in U.S. Catholic parishes, 46% report having prayer/reflection groups, 32% have evangelization programs, 37% have ministry training programs, and 29% have parish renewal programs. Along most of these dimensions, the suburban and urban parishes are nearly twice as likely to have organized programs as are the parishes of town and countryside. Some might argue that the smaller churches of town and countryside do not need a program; the people just do it informally. We suspect that is true with many of the social welfare and life-cycle care programs that translate faith into service. We will suggest in a moment, however, that adults may not be receiving much formal extra-Mass instruction in the faith where no recognized program exists.

Evangelization and ministry training programs are especially noteworthy. While the suburban parishes continue to lead all others on the latter dimension, when the two are combined, an important finding is apparent. The Black and Hispanic parishes are the most aggressive at combining both. Two-thirds of the Black parishes are actively evangelizing

and nearly half have ministry training programs. Over one-third of the Hispanic parishes are putting considerable effort into evangelization and a little under one-half have ministry training programs. Both Black and Hispanic parishes are more likely than other parishes to be served by priests from religious communities. They have larger staffs relative to their socioeconomic composition. They also are more likely to have other kinds of adult religious education programs and the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA). We do not know whether this emphasis on community- building programs in Black and Hispanic parishes derives from ethnic tradition or whether it comes from the community-based ministry of religious clergy. The outcome, however, certainly shows a clear linkage between parish community-building and the apostolate of adult catechesis and religious education.

So, with this wide range of activities available, where are those involved in their parishes participating? A little less than 25 % of all adult parishioners participate in one or more of this expanded range of activities that have some formal catechetical content. A very sizable majority of them are women and some programs are almost completely populated by women; for example, over 80% of the CCD teachers and adult sponsors of the catechumenate are women. Table 4 portrays the nature of adult participation.

The percentages do not total 25 % because individuals participate in more than one activity. Once again, however, it is clear that catechizing children or adult non-Catholics takes precedence over continuing religious education directed toward oneself. The greatest strides with adults have come through programs such as RENEW and the continued encouragement of Bible study.

**Table 4**  
**Parishioner Participation in Religious Growth**  
**And Spiritual Renewal Activities**

<u>Religious Growth Activity</u>	<u>Percent Participation</u>
Parochial or pre-school teachers	2%
Adult discussion leaders	1
Prayer groups	2
Involved with Christian education planning	2
Participate in parish renewal and spiritual renewal programs	5
Involved in Bible study groups in parish	5
Teaching CCD or work toward formation of catechumens	9

In examining the ethnographic materials of the 36 parishes we studied closely, it is unclear what is the formal and informal catechetical content of adult programs. Twenty-two percent have a clearly labeled religious education program aimed at adults; 11% have nothing even faintly resembling a formal program of adult religious education. Of the other 66% there are a variety of activities which either formally or informally involve adult

catechesis. These include cursillos, marriage encounter, parish renewals, pre-cana instruction, liturgy committees, lay ministry training, and evangelization. One parish has a combination social/educational night which includes a parish pot luck dinner along with a family educational program (videos, speakers, etc.). Just as the Directory suggested, all of these parishes are adapting catechesis to meet the local audience and circumstances.

As one might suspect, where a formal program related to adult catechesis exists, more parishioners are participating, formally or informally, in religious education. The more rural the parish, the greater the proportion participating in liturgical activities such as altar preparation, or in church socials, and fund-raisers. The more urban or suburban the parish, the greater the proportion of adults participating in liturgical roles such as choir members and eucharistic minister, and catechetical activities such as children's catechesis and adult Bible study groups. Despite the frustrations of staff with the progress of adult catechesis in the suburban churches, at least a higher proportion of the parishioners are being served by programs. It is true that a slightly higher proportion of parishioners in town and countryside than of suburbanites read the Bible alone or in groups of friends, but when the two patterns are combined, the suburbanites are still availing themselves more of the opportunity for continued catechesis — and with the higher likelihood of trained guidance through the parish *community*. A slightly higher proportion of suburbanites than other Catholics consider group Bible study their most fulfilling religious activity. They are also more likely to report a sense of fulfillment in sharing their religious beliefs.

### *Renewal Programs*

Perhaps the most important differences in the adult catechesis of the local church is in the use of parish renewal programs. There are many parish renewal programs in existence. The most widely known is RENEW, used in about 20% of the 1099 parishes in our sample. Over-all, however, 29% of the parishes report using some program for parish renewal. Despite the intent of many dioceses to encourage all parishes to use a program that it adopts, many parishes, for reasons known to them, will not try a renewal program. Here again, there is a clear urban-rural distinction: the suburban (38%), urban (28%), and town parishes (27%) are more likely to use a parish renewal program than the rural parishes (19%).

Our parishioner data show that the *proportion* of suburbanites participating in such programs is far higher than Catholics in any other locale. The staff of these parishes report that renewal programs, faithfully followed, yield two kinds of long-term benefits: (1) parishioners are more interested in continued catechesis and Bible study, and take seriously the meaning of “discipleship,” and (2) parishioners are more likely to assume parish responsibilities and enter the pool of potential parish leaders. It is also clear that much depends on the attitude of the pastor, especially his sense that laity should be both catechized and empowered with responsibilities, if the renewal program is ever to get off the ground. Because the issue is far more complex, staff are unable to gauge the extent to which parish renewal impels its participants toward renewed service in the external community.

## *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA)*

The RCIA program was promulgated in 1972 by the Sacred Congregation of Divine Worship. This program returns to the practice of the early Church when adults were initiated into the Christian community step-by-step over a period of time. Of the 1099 parishes in the Notre Dame survey, 32% reported that their communities have an organized RCIA program. Again there are vast differences by locale, as 45% of the suburban parishes use an RCIA program while only 23 and 18 percent of the parishes of town and countryside, respectively, have such a program. Of the urban parishes, those that are Black or Hispanic are much more likely to use RCIA.

In the sample of 36 parishes that were studied intensively, half have the RCIA program. Among them, there is little consensus about just what constitutes an RCIA program. Some programs last for six weeks while others continue for as long as nine months to one year. In some parishes all details of the program are attended to by the pastor, while in other parishes laity, deacons, and religious are responsible.

## *Sacramental Catechesis*

Parishes are most attentive by far to sacramental preparation. The discussion here will focus on two of the sacraments of initiation — Baptism and Confirmation.

### *Baptism*

Catechesis for baptism is directed primarily at adults — either adults who are in the RCIA process, or adult parents and godparents preparing for the baptism of an infant.

The 36 parishes in the sample once again show the diversity of catechetical programs. Twenty-five percent have no standard program of baptismal preparation in their parishes. Of the overwhelming majority of those who have such programs, all require parental involvement, but only half require godparent participation. In three-fourths of these parishes, the preparation is handled directly by the pastors. In some parishes other staff members or laity are involved with the process. The length of session(s) also varies greatly, from as little as one hour (50%) to as much as six hours (11.5 %). Only two of the 36 parishes offer any type of post-baptismal follow-up.

Even among the majority of the parishes requiring parental participation there are other criteria applying to parental involvement. In one parish, only parents of a first-born child are required to attend pre-baptism preparation. Another pastor requires that only those parents he does not know or those parents not attending Mass regularly are required to attend preparatory sessions. Non-Catholic spouses and couples are the only parents required to attend prebaptism preparation in another parish. (Recall that our sample of “Catholic parishioners” includes 2% who are parish “regulars” but not Catholic and a little

over 25 % of our active Catholic parishioners have non-Catholic spouses.) Still another parish requires only that English-speaking parents attend. All of these “exceptions” further detail that programs for baptismal preparation differ considerably among the parishes.

### *Confirmation*

Practices in this matter vary so widely among the dioceses that it is difficult to obtain even a generalized concept of catechesis for confirmation. The commonality of the 36 parishes is that they all require sacramental preparation. In 61% of the parishes, parents are required to be involved with their children in sacramental preparation. The age at which young adults most often receive the sacrament of confirmation varies from 12 to 15 years (50%) to 16 years and older (50%). Laity and religious most often prepare the students for confirmation (77%). In some instances the local pastor will become involved in the preparation (22%). The length of preparation varies from as little as six hours to a full three-year program culminating with confirmation during the senior year in high school.

In recent years, theologians, catechists, and liturgists have called attention to the early Church's practice of the conferral of all rites of initiation simultaneously. Thus, with renewed use of the Easter Vigil and increased use of RCIA, there is greater opportunity to restore the merging of young adult, not infant, Baptism with confirmation of faith, and first reception of communion. We were surprised to find no evidence of this as the customary practice in our 36 parishes, although we would surmise that some parishes are recovering this practice.

### *Liturgy and Catechesis*

Participating in the weekend liturgy has educative and formative value no less than other religious education programs. The Directory defines the role of catechesis vis-à-vis the liturgy as twofold: (1) it prepares people for full and active participation in liturgy (by helping them understand its nature, rituals, and symbols), and (2) by “reflecting” upon the community's experience of worship, it seeks to relate liturgical experience to daily life and to growth in faith. Those involved in the consultative process of the Directory believed that the richer an individual's liturgical life, the more effective the catechesis, and vice versa.

### *Homilies*

There is some evidence that shows that many parishioners feel that the Sunday homily is actually the opportunity for adult religious education. Report 5 highlighted the contents of homilies in differing parishes. A pastor from one of the parishes in the study believes that the Sunday homily is the “teachable moment” in reaching the 52 % of the parishioners who participate solely in the weekend liturgy. The sermon is in fact their adult catechesis because they have limited contact with the parish community outside Mass.

As Reports 5 and 6 detailed, considerable emphasis has been directed to preparing priests for effective homilies. Our data show that in 80% of the Masses we observed, the homily attempted to explain and apply the assigned texts for the day. Some homilies, regardless of text, stressed private morality, others social morality, some immersion and transformation of the culture, others withdrawal in preparation for the afterlife.

Perhaps the best measure of the homily as a catechetical instrument is that offered by the consumer, the parishioner — does the parishioner view the sermon as informative and does it help his/her faith to grow? Table 5 shows the proportion of parishioners who respond positively to each question, arranged by their parish locale.

**Table 5**  
**Parishioners' Evaluations of Typical Homilies**  
**(Shown in Proportion Positive)**

-	<u>Rural</u>	<u>Town</u>	<u>Suburban</u>	<u>Urban</u>
Homily is Informative	51%	58%	53%	60%
Homily Helps My Faith To Grow	39	54	48	56
Total N	(265)	(762)	(614)	(601)

It is interesting to note that the great suburban advantage in programs and staff directed to adult catechesis appears to be evened out somewhat in parishioners' responses to the homily. It is difficult to decide whether the somewhat lower assessment of the homily's effect on one's faith is the result of ineffective preaching or of higher standards. We do know from our data that the more educated and affluent the parishioner, the more he or she expects from the homilist. (Education and professional work develop facility with words; perhaps faith becomes more dependent on the mind than on the heart.) Thus it is conceivable that suburban priests may have good preaching skills, but their parishioners want even more out of them. That anomaly aside, rural parishioners who are generally less educated than the suburbanites are still quite negative about the sermons. Our site visitors confirmed that the rural homilists stuck to the text quite well but seemed unable to move beyond exhortations based in doctrine to persuasive applications in current life experiences. Thus, ironically, where other instrument of catechesis are least available — parochial schools, adult education programs, adult sacramental preparation — the weekly homily as catechesis appears also as least effective. Report 13 detailed some of the problems in the supply of effective pastors for the parish of town and countryside.

### *Hymns, Songs, and Sung Responses*

Another form of catechesis, although we seldom realize it, is the hymns, songs, and responses during the liturgy. What we sing has an affective power, a way of gripping us, that is sometimes lacking in spoken words. Liturgical musicians are fond of posing the

question: “Have you ever heard anyone leave the church humming the homily?” And yet in a liturgical church that is precisely what should happen, because the musician's prelude will be on a hymn tune set for one of the texts of the day, the hymns will allow the people, with their own lips, to proclaim the texts, and the sung responses will offer enduring statements of each parish's corpus of spirituality and ecclesiology. Report 10 showed how important liturgical music, along with preaching, was to building the *community* of the faith.

As Reports 5 and 6 detailed, there is much room for improvement in the use of musical expression for catechesis. The doctrinal content expressed by some popular songs is far from the theological vision of the Church, as lifted up in the documents of Vatican II. Music texts seldom matched the lessons or even the seasons of the church year. Most parishes for most of their masses used throw-away materials rather than a bound collection of hymns and liturgical settings that reflect the history of God's people through the ages, as well as the new. The enthusiasm of the few was mistaken for the participation of the many. Liturgical musicians often felt buffeted about, the objects of everyone's criticism and seldom integrated into the parish power structure which planned and reviewed programs.

All of these factors suggest that music is not reaching its potential as an instrument for catechesis during the liturgies. At the same time, it must be remembered that in most parishes prior to Vatican II, the Mass was celebrated by priests, music was the domain of a choir, if used, and the people prayed their prayers individualistically and privatistically. Perhaps instead of decrying the sad condition of the liturgy, we should be celebrating how far the liturgists, musicians, and many parishes have come over the last two decades. It will continue to improve as composers and musicians, publishers, catechists, professors and seminarians recognize they have a common responsibility for catechizing parishioners during the Sunday morning and Saturday evening liturgy. It would be shortsighted to think of hymns, the Kyrie, the Holy, Holy, Holy, or other liturgical music as *informal* catechesis. In music, doctrine and mood combine to unite the community and shape the faith.

### *Liturgical Change*

Even nurturing parishioners' capacities to understand liturgical change is catechesis. In that respect, there are also mixed reports from the parishes. In well over half of the parishes, pastors prepared their parishioners for the vernacular Mass, the removal of the altar rail and the installation of the table-type altar permitting the Eucharistic celebration facing the people, and related changes, through sermons, columns in the parish newsletter, or liturgical “rehearsals.” But in other parishes, the changes simply happened and the people were left to speculate why they were done. In one small parish, the pastor came in on a Friday night with his carpentry tools, tore out a communion rail and an altar (which had been handcrafted by a family as a memorial gift), installed a table from the parish hall with a cloth over it, and announced to the congregation on Sunday that the diocese had forced him to modernize the church! Some of the women of the altar society told our site visitors they “still don't understand why the priest has to wash his hands and

set the table in public view.” Many parishioners have not internalized the purposes behind liturgical change — some because they resist the change, but many because nobody bothered to inform them what the newer rites and forms were intended to symbolize.

Nowhere was this more evident than with the introduction of the communal penance rites. Although Rite II was available in all but five of the 36 parishes at least during Lent and often during Advent, 50% of the parishioners had never participated in a communal penance rite that they had recognized as such. Although Rite II is not circumscribed by the restrictions on Rite III, a few pastors told us that *any* form of communal penance is a violation of church law. Many parishioners and pastors showed confusion over the relationship between confession in the *Confiteor* during Mass, communal penance, and private confession (Rite I). Perhaps the confusion of parishioners reflects the confusion of their pastors. It is difficult to catechize clearly something that is poorly understood by the instructor.

### ***Catechesis and the Parochial School***

In the early twentieth century the parish school was thought to be the primary religious educator of the young in this country. Even then, however, as pointed out in Report 2, well over half of the school-aged population were not served by parochial schools. Today the establishment of parochial schools is no longer the primary goal for many contemporary parishes. How Catholics view religious education has changed in dramatic ways in the years since Vatican II.

In 1968, according to National Catholic Education Association statistics, 57 % of the parishes operated elementary schools. By the early 1980s, according to our parish data, a parochial school or a consolidated school supported directly by the parish can be found in 45% of the parishes. This ranges from a low of 20% of the rural parishes and 31 % of the town parishes, to highs of 57 % of the suburban parishes and 63 % of the urban parishes.

Our data from the 1099-parish sample indicate that, in over 80% of the suburban parishes that have schools, three-quarters or more of the school children are from parish families, while in the large cities, only in 60% of the parish schools are more than three-quarters of the children from the parish. As is well known, the Catholic schools in the cities are the alternative to floundering public systems; they report the highest proportion of non-Catholic children enrolled. (Periodic reports from the National Catholic Education Association provide more precise data than ours, and should be consulted.) Forty percent of the parishes report some religious staffing of their schools, but lay staffing increasingly predominates. Religious are also found in the youth ministries of 7 % of our parishes and in the religious education programs of 31 % of our large sample. By contrast, lay persons staff youth ministries of 13% of our parishes and the religious education programs of 44% of them. Thus, the staff mix of religious and lay in parochial schools is also found in other efforts at catechesis or religious education of the young.

Of the 36-parish sample from the Notre Dame Study, 13 have schools in their parishes; of those parishes 11 also have formal catechetical or religious education programs for the youth of their parish. That is not a sufficient basis for generalizations about parochial schools as such. Yet in examining the school's overall relationship to the parish's programs and governance, some interesting hints for future research emerge. They bear on the unique mix among parish as community, adult participation in programs such as religious education, and parish leadership.

### *School Parents and Parish Leadership*

One routinely hears the argument that, in addition to their value as religious educators of Catholic children and others, parish schools mobilize new generations of leadership for the parish. Parents will be attracted by the school, buy a home and settle in the neighborhood, and take on parish leadership responsibilities because of their commitment to the school. Our modest data from the 36 parishes suggest that the argument is partially correct but would benefit from some refinement.

First, one should not anticipate that parents of parochial school children will immediately take on parish leadership roles for parish education or related programs. Our data show that parents of current parochial students occupy extremes in their degree of parish involvement: many are engaged in no activities while others are engaged in many. Parents of former students, however, are more likely to engage in at least some parish activities. Both groups are far more likely to be participants than parishioners who sent their children to schools outside the parish, those who have no children, and those located in a parish without a school.

Sense of loyalty or attachment to the parish is greatest among parents of former parochial students, next highest among parents of current students, and least among the nonparochial parents and non-parents. Members of the first group are more likely to have frequent conversations with the pastor and the parish council chair, and to feel that the parish meets both their spiritual and social needs. In short, the parents of former parochial students have become the most integrated into the parish and are most likely to connect with a full range of parish ministries and programs.

Parents of current parochial students and parents of former parochial students are far more likely than other groups to support the parish financially. Unfortunately, however, our data do not allow the separation of tuition money from other financial support for the parish. Therefore, we cannot say how much more the parents of current parochial students are giving to the parish. Further, we cannot say whether, once the heavy support represented by tuition is no longer necessary, the parents of former students will continue to support the parish at higher levels. All we can say is that nearly half of parishioners who sent their children outside the parochial school, who have no children, or who are in a parish with no school give less than \$250 annually to their parish. Yet, less than a third of those whose children formerly attended the parochial school give so little to

the parish. Such findings, across parish- connected Catholics in our 36-parish sample, are not particularly surprising. Yet, they mask important differences between parishes.

### *Forming Community*

The relationship of a parochial school to the full panoply of parish programs differs greatly from one parish to the next. As we noted in Report 10, the nine parishes with the strongest sense of community and parishioner loyalty are, for the most part, organizationally complex parishes. They are not necessarily city and suburban parishes with their superior resource bases, but they *are* parishes which express vitality through a wide range of programs and ministries. A school is found in six of these nine parishes. On the other hand, the nine parishes with the weakest sense of community and loyalty also have fewer programs. Some have the resource base — in terms of their parishioners' socioeconomic levels — to sustain far more, but they do not. Schools are found in three of these nine parishes.

Further examination of the organizational life and decision-making patterns in these parishes shows that all but one of the strong-community parishes have schools that are integrated into the full life of the parish: school liturgies take note of the community needs of the larger parish; the school leaders, both staff and volunteer boards, generally have other responsibilities in the parish; and the school is budgetarily integrated into the parish planning and review process. When we look at the three schools in the parishes with least sense of community, however, we find them quite isolated from the rest of the parish's community, organizational, and budgetary life.

While some would conclude that a school always contributes to a more integrated parish community and deeper parish loyalties, we cannot make that assertion based solely on our data. Instead, we argue that in vital parish communities, the school is one of many signs of vitality. It does not stand alone as *the* magnet, but it can certainly be such a source of mobilization and loyalty if it is not left organizationally isolated. Pastors and principals and their boards learn how to accommodate each other and to use each other's resources. In fully integrated settings, school parents are a talent pool for the leadership of other programs; the process of recruitment begins when their children are in school and culminates when they have left the school. In the isolated settings, however, pastor and school supporters are often at arms length, and there are so few other parish programs that leadership recruitment is probably irrelevant.

We also have an interesting anomaly in the parishioners data. When asked what attracted them to the parish, not a high proportion of present or former school parents listed “the opportunity to get my children into the parish school.” They were more likely to mention other features about the parish, such as a caring community and a place where they can serve. In fact, the opportunity to get one's children into the school proved less attractive than other factors. Given our other data, we suspect that parishes with much organizational vitality gradually pull school parents into the total ministries of the parish; the parents come to identify so closely with these that the school is one component of the

total parish experience. In parishes without organizational vitality, however, the school has to stand alone as an attraction; little else in the life of the parish builds loyalty, and thus, *parish* loyalty does not develop. In short, some parishes have schools because Catholics are supposed to have schools, not because they have learned how valuable the school is in building a participatory, ministering, lay-involved parish. The school may contribute little, then, to the elements of life-long religious education through the parish.

In a parish that effectively integrates its school into its other programs, the presence of the school itself can set a higher likelihood that parents will avail themselves of one or more instruments for Christian growth and will take on the responsibilities for some of them. But that is not true of all schools in all parishes.

### *Parish Staff Perspectives*

The parish staffs from the 36 parishes were asked to give comments about their area of responsibility in the parish structure. In examining their comments one begins to understand the dilemma of those involved in religious education in the parish.

Many religious educators would like to see the parish direct more attention toward teenagers after their confirmation. Other than the kinds of religious education embedded in youth ministry, such as informal religious discussions and community service, not one of our 36 parishes offered specific post-confirmation programs. Other religious educators expressed a need for quality programs for the pre-teenage child in the parish religious education program.

### *Budgets, Autonomy, and the Director of Religious Education*

These feelings of inadequate religious education programs may in fact be linked with the amount of autonomy the staff has in the programs to catechize the young. Many staff members carry full responsibility for curriculum development, but have no fiscal control. As one Director of Religious Education (DRE) stated this problem, "My role as DRE changes with the moods, the ideas, the dreams and vision of the pastor."

The 36 parishes seem to share an undercurrent of many problems concerning religious education budgets. There are a few DRE's who are in total control of the budget, while others have all the responsibilities but no control over the dollars. The strongest religious education programs exist in those parishes where common ground has been found between the purse strings and the program design.

Most of the staff are involved in religious education programs for children. These same staff members expressed a desire to expand adult education programs in their parishes. Of the 36 parishes, the staff in only five were convinced that they have an independent, fully functioning adult religious education program. Some parish staffs are finding new avenues into adult catechesis through parish renewal programs, particularly

RENEW; Bible study groups often follow and are another means of involving the adults of the parish. DRE's have been asked to coordinate such varied activities. Another way in which adults are becoming involved in adult religious education is through the sponsorship of a catechumenate candidate through the local RCIA program. Seldom, however, were social service and social action programs explicitly linked to these aspects of adult religious education. Although such programs are acknowledged as an informal instrument for catechesis, staff specialization often separated social service personnel from religious education personnel.

Overall, the parish staff is concerned about providing a conduit for adults to learn more about the reforms of Vatican II. Several staff members see such knowledge as critical if the parishes are to move forward with setting parish goals for future years, and for linking faith, worship, and action in community.

Staff members remarked that the emphasis in the parish on religious education is replacing the concern for the parish school. Some observed that they often feel the school is left out of the parish. A few fear that the schools will cease to exist if current trends accelerate.

### *The Family-Centered Approach*

Just as there are many felt needs for religious education in the parish, there are also positive activities in the parishes today for both adult and child. Many staff members reported that the parishes are beginning a more family-centered approach to religious education. This approach makes it possible to have all members of the family involved in peace and justice issues. In some parishes the RCIA is a total parish effort where the whole parish prepares through prayer. The number and quality of parish renewal programs was heartening in the early 1980s. In several parishes, on-going inquiry classes are offered for anyone interested in entering the church or for those who just want to be involved in a refresher course. Religious education classes for children have been cited as having positive effects on bringing parents back to their faith. Religious education has been expanded in one parish to include not only the individual families, but also the gathered community through integration with the weekly liturgy. Staff report that in some parishes there has also been some movement toward placing adult religious education in the center of all religious education in the parish.

When pastors were asked to rate the principal sources of vitality in the parish, week-end Mass was most likely to be mentioned. Catechesis of the young at least overtook Bingo as second. Religious education for adults was not far behind Bingo across the 1099 parishes, even though it was mentioned only one-fourth as many times as Bingo as the parish activity that draws the biggest attendance. Particularly in the suburban parishes, adult religious education far overshadowed Bingo as a source of vitality. In the cities, the towns, and the rural areas, Bingo still has the upper hand.

### *Extra-Parish Sources for Religious Education*

No assessment of parish catechesis and religious education can conclude without mentioning the many other institutions on the periphery of the parish — not the least of which are the diocesan centers and retreat houses, and local Catholic colleges and universities — that offer religious education. A little over 2 % of adult parishioners report involvement in some organized religious discussion activity outside their parish, another 6% are in extra-parish Catholic fraternal organizations, 3 % are in engaged in extra-parish Catholic service organizations, and 1% are in what they regard as a Catholic political movement or organization. Beyond the first, we cannot be certain how much of the organization's agenda is devoted to adult religious formation but it is certainly present. There is a substantial overlap between parishioners who report parish-based involvements in Table 3 and those involved in extra-parish opportunities. Thus, extra-parish religious education is more likely to enhance than to replace parish-based catechesis — unless, of course, the parish does not offer much to its adults.

### *The Community as Catechesis*

Finally, one dare not overlook the profoundly catechetical nature of every parish as a *community*. Everything parishioners do together — smiles and greetings; sermons, music, prayers, and sacraments; sharing hardship and grief; interpreting success; gathering around common interests, intellectual concerns, and sympathies; sanctifying life's passages through rituals; consulting members' preferences, resolving conflict, adopting budgets, and raising money; sending parishioners out into the larger community as the leaven of Christ — all imprint the most indelible lessons of faith and mission that parishioners can remember. That is why sense of community, as discussed in Report 10, is so important. From identity comes loyalty and purpose. The parish which has no common story to tell, which asks nothing of its parishioners' and maintains pre-Vatican II liturgical styles, we found, has done little to catechize its people. They do not form a moral community.

Catechesis has evolved a long way from the mandates of the Third Plenary Council, the compensatory programs of the Confraternity, and the guidelines of the *Catechetical Directory*. Each parish does it well or does it poorly, offering a feast or famine for young or elder. Patterns do appear in the data and clearly some parishioners are more disadvantaged than others. Often the “disadvantages” will not be felt until persuasive leaders raise parishioners' sights. And often “advantaged” parishioners will shun the banquet; their life experiences or their leadership have not moved them beyond a comfortable set of religious understandings. While there is much to celebrate in the many instruments of religious education in the parish, no one can ever be satisfied with the state of affairs — because what concerns us ultimately concerns us urgently.

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