

Catechist enjoys helping children learn and love the faith

By Jeanne Gehret

Editor's Note: Denise Mack has been involved in religious education since 1964, when she began as a volunteer religion teacher in her home parish, St. Ambrose. Her commitment to catechetics led her to leave teaching in the public schools, to serve in both parish and diocesan posts, and to pursue two theological degrees. She is currently the director of religious education at St. Rita's Church, Webster.

"Denise's extensive theological training enables her to bring a wealth of information to any subject she presents," says Maribeth Mancini, diocesan consultant for adult religious education. "But she always integrates sound theology with daily experiences. And she responds from the heart with a great deal of caring."

In this interview, Denise Mack explains how catechetical ministry enriches both student and teacher.

How did you first become involved in religious education?

When I was teaching other subjects in the public schools, St. Ambrose had no religious education outside of the parochial school, so I helped set up a program. Soon, I found that catechesis is not like teaching any other subject; it's a way of life.

My own theological studies began shortly after. When I took teacher training courses I sat at the edge of my chair taking notes. Everything I heard made me hunger and thirst for more. In 1966, when the parish formed an adult education committee I said: "I really need adult education. I don't know anything, and here I am teaching."

I was so very impressed by my fellow committee members. Every person on that committee was very concerned with issues like the Vietnam War and civil rights — issues I wanted to hear addressed from the pulpit.

It was a tremendously intense time. We had a feeling of co-creating the Church, and tried to live the teachings of Vatican II as they came off the press. Our adult education programs at St. Ambrose regularly drew crowds of 200.

Before the Vatican Council, teaching

religion was largely the responsibility of priests and religious. What changes have taken place since lay people like you got involved?

In the '50s, we had parish staffs consisting of many priests. Since the Council, a real teamwork has developed among the laity, clergy and religious. Although today we have fewer vocations to the priesthood and religious life, an educated and prayerful laity has emerged to minister to people's religious needs.

Being catechetical ministers has challenged many lay people to find God in their daily lives. Good catechesis, after all, is really reflecting on life with theological tools.

One of our present catechists, who is mother to a young family, also teaches at the Y and takes two advanced math courses. She prepares for teaching not only by planning lessons, but also by reflection on her daily experiences.

Catechists, like other teachers, find that teaching is the best incentive to learn. As a DRE (director of religious education), I have a difficult time persuading new catechists to take teacher training. But once they start the classes, they give glowing evaluations of the training programs.

How do you see religious education in the fuller context of parish life that includes worship, fellowship and community service?

There is no religious education without those other components of parish life. Religion education tries to show that reflection on the scriptures, worship, service to our fellow humans and community building enhance the quality of life.

We used to teach religion as if you could learn it from a book — like English, typing or math. But teachers became frustrated; they said, "I taught it, but they didn't learn it."

Today we realize that people learn from what they do, not from what the instructor says. A good catechist should no more stop at the intellectual (concept) than a sales representative should avoid demonstrating products. You never hear sales people say, "I sold it but they didn't buy it." They put in your hand and ask you to try it.



Denise Mack, director of religious education at St. Rita's Parish, Webster, describes how post-Vatican II catechetical ministry has enriched teachers, students and parents.

Today we also recognize that there are different styles of learning. Some people do not learn by hearing or reading. For them, hands-on experience or arts and crafts is the only way to learn.

Critics of religious education today complain that Catholics are becoming "religiously illiterate." They know that Jesus loves them, but they can't recite the Ten Commandments or the corporal works of mercy.

At St. Rita's, we expect our students to be able to speak their faith as well as live it. Tests in our eighth grade show that the kids can recite the Ten Commandments. Their actions show that they also know what they mean.

In order to be confirmed, students must complete special projects ranging from

worshipping with the monks at Piffard to working in a home for the handicapped or a soup kitchen. One high school student found her life's work through a confirmation group activity of visiting a home for handicapped teen-agers. She went on to study special education, and now she's doing it!

These young people witness to the Spirit in so many ways. They plan children's Liturgy of the Word; they serve as lectors and song leaders. They will not be inert and passive members of society; they are disciples of Christ and know what it is to be Spirit-filled.

Have you ever encountered opposition among parish staffs or parents about insistence that religious education be supported by worship and service?

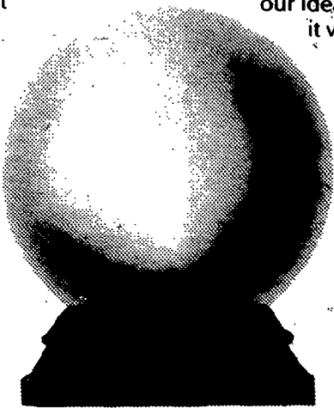
Never from parish staffs. Occasionally,

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When facing the future, trust in tradition. Trust in the past.

The future is unknown to us, and we can only speculate on what it may bring. History, however, can provide one rule of thumb: things of quality will endure. The traditions of the Jesuit teachers have endured.

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