

Evolution of catechesis influenced by changing needs

EDITORS' NOTE: Catechesis is a major theme running throughout the recommendations being considered at the General Synod this weekend. Because of this heavy emphasis, we thought it would be appropriate in this anniversary issue to review the evolution of religious education in this diocese during the last 125 years.

By Mary Britton
Guest contributor

How does the church effectively pass on its tradition and form new members in faith? This question is a crucial part of the church's mission, beginning with Jesus' words, "Go, therefore, make disciples of all nations ..." (Mt. 28:19).

The Diocese of Rochester has a rich history regarding the ongoing development of catechetics, or faith formation, over the past 125 years. In our early days, catechesis meant religious instruction for children. The Catholic school was its focus and source. In 1836 German immigrants opened St. Joseph's School in Rochester, which was still part of the New York diocese. And Irish immigrants opened St. Patrick's School in Rochester in 1839.

The number of Catholic schools in the diocese continued to grow during the 19th and early 20th centuries. The diocese, which boasted 53 schools by 1909, appointed Father John M. Duffy as its first superintendent of schools in 1929. Thirty-six more schools were built in the years after World War II.

Meanwhile, another catechetical trend was developing. In 1905 Pope Pius X wrote the encyclical *Acerbo Nimis*, known as the "Magna Carta" of the Confraternity of Christian Doctrine. In the encyclical, the pope expressed concern about ignorance of religion and — to counteract this problem — ordered the establishment of CCD in each Catholic parish.

In 1933, the National Center for the Confraternity of Christian Doctrine was formed in Washington, D.C., to promote religious education for the growing number of Catholic children attending public schools. In October, 1935, Rochester was the host for the first National Catechetical Congress of the CCD.

Also in 1935, Archbishop Edward Mooney (1933-1937) established a diocesan office to supervise CCD, as well as vacation schools and parish-discussion groups. Fathers John M. Ball and John M. Duffy shared the responsibility for this office's activities.

Bishop Kearney named Monsignor Albert Schnacky the first full-time head of the diocesan CCD Office in June, 1947. Sister Mary Ann Binsack, RSM, who currently serves as diocesan director of Faith Development Ministry, described this early office as "operating out of a



S. John Wilkin/Staff photographer
Members of Mendon's St. Catherine of Siena Church pray the Our Father at the conclusion of this Sept. 19 family education session.

broom closet on Chestnut Street."

In those days, Sister Binsack said, the office offered support for parish religious-education programs administered by priests, religious and a few volunteer catechists. In 1950, 27,000 children were enrolled in parish catechetical programs. That number jumped to 53,000 in 1967 before falling to 21,783 in 1986.

Monsignor Schnacky directed the CCD Office from 1947-1970. The office had a succession of directors — some for very short periods — in the early 1970s: Fathers Dan Holland and Robert Collins; Sister Michael Lappetito, RSM (1973-76); and Fathers Don Schwab and Lewis Brown (1977-81).

Perhaps changes in the office's leadership reflected the state of catechetics at the time. The Second Vatican Council (1962-65) had begun a catechetical renewal. Faith was now understood as an ongoing relationship with God; thus catechesis was no longer just for children.

This period featured a renewed emphasis on adult faith formation and ongoing conversion to Jesus Christ. This emphasis was heightened by the promulgation of the provisional text of the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults in 1972.

The National Confraternity of Christian Doctrine Office was incorporated into the U.S. Catholic Conference's education department in 1969. The National Catechetical Directory, published by the USCC in 1979, broadened the definition of catechesis to include education and to overlap with liturgy, social ministry and service, evangelization and other activities.

Catechesis was described as a lifelong process of faith formation involving all community members. The faith of adults

was seen as key to parish life and the formation of new members in faith and life.

From 1981-89, Sister Binsack directed the diocesan Office of Religious Education. By then, priests and women religious had ceased being the prime administrators in parish programs. More and more lay people were being hired to coordinate catechetics, and new structures were being developed to meet new challenges.

"One of the things that our office tried to build up was more and more contact with the people in the parishes," Sister Binsack said. The diocese also offered such opportunities as in-parish visitations, retreats for catechetical leaders and catechist formation sessions. In addition, it published *Sacramental Guidelines* and a *Religion Curriculum*.

"We began efforts to upgrade professionalism in the field," Sister Binsack said. "We saw the need for training qualified personnel in catechetics, and we began to work out how that could happen."

As a first step, the Religious Education Office developed a certification process for all catechetical leaders. That process was implemented in February, 1989. During this period, Sister Binsack noted, the office also worked increasingly on the RCIA with the diocesan Office of Liturgy.

"To me the greatest challenge was Bishop (Matthew H.) Clark's address to pastors and catechetical leaders on the Well-Integrated Catechetical Plan in 1987," Sister Binsack said.

While stressing lifelong education, Bishop Clark's vision for diocesan catechesis includes Catholic schools, a comprehensive catechetical process in all parishes, and the development of qualified personnel. Everyone should have

access to faith-formation experiences. WICP calls for "opportunities for all parishioners to encounter the Gospel message and respond by fostering faith and giving service."

Structural changes occurred in 1982, when Sister Roberta Tierney, SSND, assumed leadership of what was then the diocesan Division of Education. The division encompassed the Catholic Schools Office; Office of Religious Education; and the departments of continuing education, youth ministry and communications.

Sister Binsack became head of the Division of Education in 1989. In addition, Maribeth Mancini became the first lay director of the Office of Religious Education.

Facing the prospects of higher costs and declining enrollment during the late 1980s, the diocese began reorganizing its learning institutions into a diocesan system. Although enrollment in diocesan Catholic schools had peaked at 55,000 in 1959, it dropped to 45,534 in 1966; 24,662 in 1974; and 18,217 in 1986.

This process of reorganizing Catholic schools — which involved the closing of several institutions — was undertaken to ensure the continued availability of Catholic schools as an important component of catechesis, Sister Binsack said. Since reorganization has taken place, she added, enrollment has stabilized.

Major changes in diocesan organization were implemented in 1992, when the former Division of Education took on the name Faith Development Ministry. This ministerial area comprises the departments of Catholic schools; evangelization and catechesis; and professional development.

The diocesan Office of Professional Development oversees both continuing education and an expanded certification program for designated ministers, which enables lay people serving as professional ministers in parishes to receive diocesan certification in specific areas of service (liturgy, catechetics, parish visitation, etc.).

The Department of Evangelization and Catechesis offers diocesan parishes consultation and support services on catechetical programs for all ages as well as sacramental preparation and youth ministry. Sacramental preparation, including marriage preparation, is now parish-based throughout the diocese.

"I think the future calls us to new models of religious education ... much more emphasis on the family and inter-generational approaches," Sister Binsack speculated. The current Synod process will expand the vision of catechetics and influence future developments as the Rochester diocese moves into the 21st century, she predicted.

Britton serves as catechetical consultant for the Rochester diocese.

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