



Catholic Courier

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DIOCESE OF ROCHESTER, NEW YORK ■ VOL. 105 NO. 44 ■ THURSDAY, August 11, 1994 ■ 75¢ ■ 32 PAGES/2 sections

Religious education: Curriculum changes span generations

By Rob Cullivan
Staff writer

In late October of this year, diocesan Faith Development Ministry will unveil a religious-education curriculum designed to foster the growth of a Catholic's faith from birth through adulthood.

Titled "Principles and Guidelines for Catechesis in the Diocese of Rochester," the document's rough draft embodies the 1993 Diocesan Synod's call for life-long religious education as the No. 1 diocesan priority.

Indeed, the document even contains a series of charts noting the physical, social, intellectual, psychological, spiritual and moral growth of Catholics throughout their entire lives.

"For many years, catechesis was mainly child-oriented and school-based, both in the Catholic school and in the parish-based religious education programs," the draft states in a passage from the "Models for Catechesis" section.

"Today ... the centrality of adult catechesis as foundational is recognized," the passage continues. "The faith of adults is a witness and an encouragement to the younger members of the community, and to society, while grounding the community in ongoing conversion to Jesus and discipleship."

The draft document outlines catechetical goals for Catholics as they progress from early and middle childhood through early and late adolescence.

The draft's guidelines on early childhood catechesis, for example, note that a Catholic's faith begins growing the moment he or she enters the human family.

"Primarily through the care and unconditional love of parents, God's love is communicated to infants and young children," the document states.

The guidelines emphasize the importance of parents imparting to their children "the willingness to share, respect for others, respect for authority, God, and prayer as a part of family life."

On such a foundation laid in family life, a child is prepared to enter their "second family," — the parish, the document notes.

The document also contains a section devoted to meeting the specific needs Catholics with disabilities may have as they learn the faith, and a section containing catechetical principles for adult Catholics.

From Bible-study groups to issue-oriented presentations, adult education takes a variety of forms in parishes, diocesan experts acknowledge.

Yet to succeed, any adult-education program — regardless of its form — must allow participants to direct their own learning process rather than relying on others for direction, according to Deacon Claude Lester, diocesan director of pastoral council formation and author of the document's section on adults.

In an adult-learning situation, for example, the section notes that a "learner sets the goals/timelines for the learning experience," whereas in a traditional learning situation, the teacher determines what is to be learned, and when,

how and if it has been learned.

Overall, the document's intent is "to outline what a fully catechized adult ought to know, have experience of and believe about the Catholic faith," according to the "User's Guide" for the document.

To that end, the document lays out 14 "Faith Themes" drawn from such sources as the The Catechism of the Catholic Church, and The National Catechetical Directory: Sharing the Light of Faith. The themes are grouped under four headings: Word, Worship, Community and Discipleship.

Three of the 14 themes, for example, are covered under the heading "Word" as follows.

1. *Revelation:* God's Self-Revelation; Our Faith Response.
2. *Scripture:* Old and New Testament, Gospels and the Letters of St. Paul.
3. *Creedal Concepts:* Includes such areas as the Mystery of the One God, the Church, the Sacraments, Mary and the Saints and Death, Judgment and Eternity.

In addition to the three themes covered under "Word," the document also examines the following 11 themes under these headings:

WORSHIP: Sacraments, the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults, Prayer and Worship and Special Seasons of the Liturgical Year.

COMMUNITY: Church, Faith and Identity, Personal Growth and Relationships.

DISCIPLESHIP: Christian Lifestyles, Morality, Justice and Peace, and Service.

These 14 themes comprise the mission of the Catholic Church, noted Elizabeth M. Webster, author of the themes' section. A religious educator for 13 years, Webster currently serves as the diocese's consultant for young-adult ministry.

Webster explained that the themes

were based on similar outlines from several sources, including the catechetical curriculum of the Albany diocese. All of the themes are broadly outlined so that catechists can use them as the basis for religious education for any group of Catholics from toddlers to adults, she said.

Take the "Christian Lifestyles" theme, for example. The draft document asserts that when teaching on such a theme, a catechist's ultimate goal should be to make his or her students understand Christian lifestyles as a vocation. Yet, the document notes, a catechist would present different topics for each age group examining the theme.

For children, that might mean concentrating on the various ways of life — single, married, religious and clergy — to which various people are called. On the other hand, catechesis for an older

adolescent would focus on what skills a Catholic needs to discern a vocation, and to examine which vocation the adolescent is called to adopt.

Rather than emphasizing particular classroom exercises teachers must use to instruct students, the new curriculum emphasizes the goal each age group is attempting to realize in its faith formation, and leaves mapping out the road to that goal up to individual teachers and parishes, Webster and other diocesan experts noted.

"My experience with the former curriculum was it got so specific, most religious educators put in on the shelf and never made any reference to it," Webster said.

On that score, the new curriculum also reflects the changes that have taken

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