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Catechists

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"I'm Catholic because there were certain people in my life for whom faith was the core of their life, and I knew about that because of the way they lived their life, and the way they talked about God — and that, to me, is a catechist," she said.

The year of catechesis

Britton pointed out that 1997 may be as good a year as any for Catholics to seriously consider becoming catechists. That's because Pope John Paul II, in his 1994 apostolic letter *Tertio Millennio Adveniente* ("As The Third Millennium Draws Near"), called for 1997 to be a year of reflection on the church's catechism.

The papal document was drawn up in anticipation of the church's Jubilee Year in 2000, and called for the church to reflect on Jesus in 1997, the Holy Spirit in 1998 and God the Father in 1999. The document also called on the church during 1997 to reflect on the faith and the church's catechism.

"The first year therefore will be the opportune moment for a renewed appreciation of catechesis in its original meaning as 'the apostles' teaching' (Acts 2:42) about the person of Jesus Christ and his mystery of salvation," the pope wrote.

The year of revision

This year, also, the diocese will complete its revision of the process by which it forms and certifies catechists, Britton said. This is the third time the diocese has created a method by which catechists are formed, according to diocesan documents.

From 1981 to 1987, catechists were formed through a program titled "Continuing Education for Religion Teachers," or "CERT." Through several hours of course work, catechists were certified first at the basic level, then as experienced catechists and finally as master catechists.

Then, in 1987, the diocese changed the catechist formation process to one requiring 10 hours of course work every two years for those serving as catechists. There was no formal certification process, the documents said.

Prompted in part by the 1994 diocesan Synod's naming of "Lifelong Faith Formation" as the number one diocesan priority, the diocese has been revising the catechist formation process over the last two years, Britton explained. The diocese also realized volunteer catechists have less time to devote to classes for improving their skills, and might appreciate more "user-friendly" approaches to catechetical formation, she said.

Britton noted that in the past, catechetical formation classes sometimes ran for five to six hours at a stretch, creating, in some cases, insurmountable time barriers for volunteer catechists who worked full-time jobs or had other claims on their time. Under the new framework, catechists can take a series of two-hour classes offered at many sites throughout the diocese, she said.

The new framework also allows catechists to meet many of their certification requirements by studying videotaped presentations at home or working out of textbooks that they can take home, she said.

"People's time is at a premium," Britton said. "They just do not have hours and hours to spend on this."

Coleen M. De King, associate director of Christian formation at St. Rita's Church in Webster, said she and other catechetical leaders were pleased the diocese had diversified the ways catechists can now be certified.

"It's something we've been asking for for years," she said.

She added that her parish may host an institute this year similar to the one that took place at Guardian Angels.

The Guardian Angels' institute has served as a kick-off of the new approach to certification, Britton said, adding that the new certification process should be in place completely by fall. She also pointed out that many catechists will be "grand-

fathered" into certification because they already have done course work that meets the requirements of the new certification process.

What must I do to become a catechist?

First and foremost, experts said, an aspiring catechist should contact his or her parish catechetical leaders and ask what opportunities are available. Prospective catechists are screened and interviewed by parish or school catechetical leaders. When a candidate is chosen to serve in some catechetical ministry, a catechist is commissioned during some sort of parish blessing ritual, Britton said, noting such rituals vary from parish to parish.

After being commissioned by their parishes or schools, Britton said catechists must spend one to three years completing course work in "foundational certification." Such work includes study in their area of concentration — children and adolescents, sacramental catechesis, adult catechesis, family catechesis or youth ministry.

In addition, catechists seeking foundational certification must study the following core areas, she said.

- Discovering my experience of God — reflecting on how God has been a part of my faith.
- Faith within families.
- Overviews of the Old and New Testaments.
- Basic tools for Scripture study.
- Discipleship — the church's morality as embodied in such teachings as the Ten Commandments and the Beatitudes.
- Creed — the church's doctrine.
- Worship — the sacraments.
- Community — different models of what the church is: "The People of God," for example, or "Servant of the World."

After completing their foundational certification, Britton noted that catechists can then become certified on the master level by completing additional course work based on 14 "faith themes" over a 12-year period.

Should I be a catechist?

Some Catholics may wonder whether they're truly qualified to teach others about the faith. But catechists come from all walks of life, Britton said, noting she's met lawyers, engineers, secretaries and homemakers in the catechetical field.

That's a point echoed by Marilyn Kielbasa, an editor and writer for St. Mary's Press, a catechetical publishing firm based in Winona, Minn. Slated as a speaker at the "Alive In Christ" institute, Kielbasa spoke with the *Catholic Courier* by phone from her company office. She stressed the universality of the catechetical call.

"It's not important to me that they have an academic background," she said of aspiring catechists. "It is important to me that they have a willingness to learn."

De King pointed out that she tells her catechists that they must do five things: "Pray, pray, pray, prepare and practice." Catechists should have a healthy prayer life themselves, be willing to pray with their students and, third, find someone who can serve as a "partner" who will pray for them while they teach, she said.

Catechists must also prepare for their classes, she said, noting that can take several hours of work. Some aspiring catechists may find that they don't have enough time to properly prepare to teach regularly, she said. Such Catholics might consider giving one-time presentations on the faith, she said, noting, for example, that many parishes could use experts in their pews to speak about such issues as the church's life teachings during October — Respect Life Month.

Finally, catechists must practice what they preach, De King said. That's particularly important because, De King and other catechetical experts stressed, students — especially young people — learn more from a catechist's example than from his or her knowledge.

"They may not remember what you say, but they will remember you," De King said.

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