Special Report

National Profile of Catechetical Ministry:

A Joint Project of the
National Conference for Catechetical Leadership,
the National Catholic Educational Association,
and the United States Catholic Conference

Project Vision

In 1998, the National Conference for Catechetical Leadership partnered with the National Catholic Educational Association's Department of Religious Education and the United States Catholic Conference's Department of Education to launch an annual data-gathering process that would result in a database of key dimensions of catechetical ministry in the United States. This initial collaboration resulted in a study of diocesan Directors of Religious Education in June 1999.

In September 1999, the Jesuit Institute for Catechetical Development, based in Chicago, Illinois, funded the remainder of the project, permitting the timely completion of surveys of parish directors of religious education and pastors, as well as focus groups of diocesan and parish directors of religious education.

Questions designed for the Diocesan Directors' survey were replicated in surveys of parish directors of religious education (or their equivalent) and of pastors, who are named in the *General Directory for Catechesis* as "educators of the faith."

The next step was a series of focus groups with those in catechetical ministry, followed by the unveiling of an annual data gathering tool that would permit the kind of benchmarking and comparative analysis necessary to help promote the continued growth and professionalization of catechetical ministry throughout the United States.

Building a Profile of Catechetical Ministry

The final step remaining in the project is the design and testing of a comprehensive, standardized data-gathering tool for catechetical ministry. This tool is being prepared under the direction of the three collaborating organizations and being offered to dioceses for use with their parishes for their annual data-gathering process. In this way, dioceses will have a common framework for comparison and a tool with which both national and local studies of catechesis can be conducted inexpensively and efficiently in the future.

The Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA) at Georgetown University is designing the data-gathering tool as an on-line questionnaire that will allow dioceses and parishes to report directly over the web key information about their catechetical ministry programs. Paper versions will also be available. Set to launch in January 2001, the Parish Catechetical Ministry questionnaire is the end result of this comprehensive, three-part study of parish catechetical ministry programs in the U.S.

This Special Report presents key findings from the surveys of diocesan directors of religious education, parish directors of religious education, and pastors, including the open-ended comments provided by those groups. It also discusses findings from six focus groups conducted of diocesan and parish directors of religious education. Analysis and selected comments from participants are included in the report where they illuminate topics being discussed.

Table 1

Sampling, Response Rates, and Margin of Error

	Distributed	Returned	Response Rate	Margin of Error*
Diocesan Offices of Religious Education	181	144	80%	--
Pastors	4,946	1,330	27%	±3%
Parish Directors of Religious Education	4,965	2,050	41%	±2%

* Based on standard statistical assumptions for the number of returns for the two parish-level surveys. The diocesan study is not a sample survey and so a margin of error cannot be estimated.

Project Inspiration

The *General Directory for Catechesis*, issued by the Vatican in 1997, provides the inspiration and context for this composite study of catechetical ministry. Its vision for catechesis serves as the framework for developing social scientific measures to help assess contemporary catechetical challenges. Table 1 shows sample sizes, response rates, and margin of error for each part of the study.

GDC Provides Catholic Vision

The *General Directory for Catechesis*, or *GDC*, presents the fullest statement yet of the Catholic vision for catechesis, defining its primary object as bringing people into communion with Christ. Understanding the process of catechesis as movement from "initial conversion" to a mature and active faith, the *GDC* sets out six fundamental tasks:

- Promoting knowledge of the faith
- Liturgical education
- Moral formation
- Teaching to pray
- Education for community life
- Missionary initiation

Assessment Measures Based on the *GDC*

CARA designed a series of measures to help assess catechetical effectiveness in light of the *GDC*. These measures were then used in questions of catechetical professionals – diocesan DREs, parish DREs, and pastors – to help assess the perceived emphasis and effectiveness of their work to:

- Contextualize catechesis in evangelization

- Present the content of Catholic faith

- Root catechesis in Scripture and Tradition

- Increase understanding of Church history

- Build a sense of parish community

- Connect individuals to the broader Church

- Give adequate consideration to parish social/cultural contexts

- Emphasize liturgical life as the source/summit of ecclesial life

- Assist development of personal spirituality and devotional life

- Foster personal moral formation

- Raise consciousness about the social obligations of faith

- Promote action for social justice

- Impart a sense of individual responsibility in the mission of the Church

Major Findings of the National Profile of Catechetical Ministry

Catechetical ministry faces a number of challenges today. In particular, the study suggests that the ministry should work to deepen excellence in catechesis, respond to increasing diversity in background and needs within today's parishes, broaden adult faith formation while serving the needs of children and youth, provide adequate training and resources for catechists, and advance respect and priority given to catechetical leadership as a profession.

Specifically, the five sets of overall findings that underlie these challenges are as follows:

1 **In terms of the goals laid out in the *General Directory for Catechesis*, parishes are the most successful at presenting the content of the Catholic faith and connecting it to Scripture and Tradition.** They are less successful at conveying the obligations or implications of the faith. As one focus group participant said: *Children in my classroom don't go to Sunday Mass and they have a variety of reasons. But, their parents are becoming educated by them . . . I'm always grateful that they are asking for more, but I'm concerned about the ones who don't.*

2 **Most parishes rely on traditional classroom-based religious education for youth catechesis, but many also coordinate this classroom model with innovative family-centered or intergenerational formats.** Many catechetical leaders report experimenting with new formats or offering a variety of programs concurrently to suit different needs. However, while there is some concern with the limitations of the classroom model, the most common response is to supplement or complement that model rather than to replace it wholesale. Said one focus group member: *The programs that are having the greatest degree of success are ones in which the DRE has sat down in a very concentrated way with parents and sort of brainstormed what's going to work within our parish. And sometimes that's having three or four different models going on in the parish at once . . .*

3 **Adult faith formation receives considerably less attention than children's catechesis and sacramental preparation.** While nearly all parishes offer RCIA, only about half of these programs are supervised by DREs, and only one in four devote significant time to adult religious education. Catechetical leaders identify children's sacramental preparation as one of the best underutilized opportunities in parishes for catechizing adults. One focus group participant, reflecting on sacramental preparation, said: *And that is a very rich way of reaching parents. A lot of times they wouldn't come to a faith formation activity or thing for themselves, but if it is connected with their children, they will do it.*

4 **Adequate training for catechists is crucial for greater effectiveness in parish religious education programs.** Yet many dioceses do not require training or certification for either DREs or catechists. Further, many DREs find it so challenging to find parishioners willing to volunteer as catechists that they cannot begin to look at training issues. Raising levels of respect and support for the ministry of the catechist may be an indispensable part of the effort to increase catechetical effectiveness. Said one focus group participant: *Even though we usually don't pay the catechists, they usually volunteer, but we need to pay them in education, we need to pay them in finding babysitting . . . [to] help them in any way that we can and make sure that ongoing formation is done especially for them.*

5 **Professional catechetical ministry is often given limited financial priority, and marked by a reliance on part-time and volunteer ministers.** According to diocesan DREs, only 60 percent of parishes have paid DREs. One in four parish DREs are part-time. Diocesan and parish DREs want to build up the effectiveness of catechetical ministry, but have little funding for catechetical resources and professional development opportunities, and they fear that current salaries fail to attract dynamic professionals to the ministry. Only a little more than half of full-time DREs have Master's degrees. As one focus group participant remarked: *I'm beginning to worry about the lack of professionals available to fill DRE slots. The professionally-trained person is not available. I think that just trickles down to catechists who are not trained either.*

Assessment of Programs in Light of the *General Directory for Catechesis*

A majority of diocesan DREs, parish DREs, and pastors consider parish catechetical programs at least somewhat successful in achieving the catechetical goals laid out in the *General Directory for Catechesis* [See *Table 2*].

Table 2

Stronger on Content of the Faith, Weaker on its Implications

For the sake of clearer comparison between parish DREs, Pastors, and diocesan DREs, only the highest ("very much") responses are shown in the table below. Overall positive responses (those saying "somewhat" or "very much") for parish DREs range from 76 to 98 percent, for pastors from 71 to 95 percent, and for diocesan DREs from 52 to 98 percent.

How well does the religious education program in your parish:
Percent responding "Very Well":

	Parish DREs	Pastors	Diocesan DREs*
Present the content of Catholic faith	78%	62%	69%
Root catechesis in Scripture and Tradition	71	58	60
Build a sense of parish community	61	54	39
Foster personal moral formation	50	46	41
Emphasize liturgical life as the source and summit of ecclesial life	57	54	32
Raise consciousness about the social obligations of faith	45	38	19
Assist the development of personal spirituality and devotional life	41	36	27
Impart a sense of individual responsibility in the mission of the Church	43	42	18
Connect individuals to the broader Church	35	31	n/a
Give adequate consideration to the social and cultural contexts of the parish	35	30	19
Promote action for social justice	35	28	13
Increase understanding of Church history	29	22	11
Contextualize catechesis in evangelization	25	20	6

* in the case of Diocesan DREs, the questions were asked in terms of the parishes of the diocese as a whole

- Almost all catechetical leaders report that parish religious education programs present the content of Catholic faith "somewhat" or "very well." High percentages also report that parishes do at least "somewhat" well in rooting catechesis in Scripture and Tradition. But these two areas are the only ones in which a majority of respondents consider parishes "very much" effective.

- Three-fourths or more of catechetical leaders say parish programs do "somewhat well" in building a sense of community, fostering personal moral formation, emphasizing liturgical life, and assisting the development of personal spirituality and devotional life. They also say parishes do at least "somewhat well" in giving adequate consideration to the social and cultural contexts of their parishes, imparting a sense of responsibility in the mission of the Church, and raising consciousness about the social obligations of faith. However, as Table 4 shows, less than half of respondents say parishes accomplish these goals "very well."

- Diocesan DREs and pastors are particularly less positive in their views of the adequacy with which parish programs promote social justice, increase the parish's understanding of Church history, or contextualize catechesis in evangelization. Indeed, nearly two-fifths of diocesan Directors of Religious Education and one-fourth of pastors say that parishes accomplish these goals "only a little."

- Compared to diocesan DREs, parish DREs and pastors see parishes as being more successful at conveying the obligations and implications of faith and contextualizing it within the evangelizing mission of the entire Church.

- In general, diocesan Directors of Religious Education rate the success of parish programs in achieving the catechetical goals of the *General Directory for Catechesis* significantly lower than parish Directors of Religious Education or pastors.

Program Focus and Formats

Parishes currently offer a wide variety of religious education, faith formation and catechetical programs to many different groups in their communities. Sacramental preparation and a focus on children in general remains the centerpiece for parish religious education.

Almost all parish religious education programs provide traditional classroom-based religious education in at least some form. The great majority of catechetical leaders at both the diocesan and parish levels consider service and volunteer projects to be an important component of effective catechesis, and most parishes do include such projects as a part of their programs.

- Roughly half of parishes offer retreat models, Lectionary-based programs, or family-centered models of religious education. They are considerably less likely to offer inter-generational religious education programs.

- While 94 percent of directors of religious education say their parishes offer RCIA programs, considerably fewer say they adapt the RCIA for children (61 percent).

- RCIA and Bible study are the programs for adults which parishes are most likely to offer.

- Parishes with part-time DREs tend to offer fewer non-traditional or adult programs, particularly the RCIA for children, family-centered programs, and Bible study.

In addition, nearly all diocesan and parish DREs say that a sensitivity to multicultural issues is important for effective catechesis. However, less than half of diocesan DREs and less than a third of parish DREs report offering training for catechists in this area. Focus group participants applaud the increasing availability of multicultural resources from publishers, but acknowledge that they need to do more in their parishes to address multicultural issues.

Compared to other alternatives, DREs value family-centered models more and report that they are more widely used than retreat-based, Lectionary-based, or inter-generational models. As one focus group participant comments, *"I feel so strongly about the family model, because I can see more and more [it works and has] affirmed families and empowered them, so to speak, to catechize their children. It recognizes that . . . they do have that faith within them already. Jesus is already present in their lives and that is what we need to affirm."*

Compared to parish DREs and pastors, diocesan DREs feel that the traditional classroom model is significantly less important for effective catechesis. For parish DREs and pastors, traditional classroom models and family-centered models are equally important for effective catechesis, while diocesan DREs give one-third less importance to classroom models. This seems to confirm that parish catechetical leaders do not so much see these models as mutually exclusive as seek to incorporate family-centered learning into traditional catechesis. Diocesan Directors of Religious Education, on the other hand, tend to think in terms of the need for "total catechesis," which makes classroom catechesis only one part of effective catechesis.
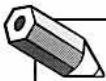

Table 3

Formats Seen as Most Effective Are Not Always Used

Elements of Catechesis: Importance and Actual Use
Percent responding:

	Important for Effective Catechesis			
	Diocesan DREs	Parish DREs	Pastors	Use in Parish
Service/volunteer projects	93%	95%	90%	84%
Continuing adult religious education/faith formation	n/a	93	91	79*
Traditional classroom-based religious education	61	90	89	95
Family-centered religious education	89	88	84	51
Lectionary-based religious education	n/a	76	68	49
Retreat models of religious education	63	72	68	38
Intergenerational models of religious education	n/a	67	56	18

*parishes saying they "promote adult faith formation"

Apart from the question of what formats are used, the most important factors DREs identify in successful religious education programs are the expertise, creativity, and commitment of parish catechetical leadership and catechists, the support of pastors, and the involvement of parents and families. They also emphasize the importance of collaboration, both between ministries in a given parish, and among parishes. One focus group participant points out that a successful program is *"where . . . all the parish formation programs work together and understand each other's role."*

Diocesan directors were asked to identify religious education programs in their dioceses that are particularly innovative and successful and describe the factors that contribute to their success. These programs are most often inter-generational, family-centered, Lectionary-based, retreat-based, or involve alternative scheduling options. DREs and pastors express enthusiasm for the value of these alternative models, and recognize their necessity. As a focus group participant points out, *"we are challenged to new models of catechesis, new paradigms."* However, use of such programs is not yet widespread at the parish level, as shown in *Table 3* on the previous page.

Specific examples of innovative and successful programs mentioned by responding diocesan DREs include:

- **St. Peter Cathedral** (Rockford, IL) celebrates a "Super Saturday" once a month when families spend a morning at the parish doing crafts and activities to facilitate learning and praying together.

- **St. Marie Parish** (Manchester, NH) has a "family option" that provides sessions at different levels, materials for parents to use with their children at home, and monthly gatherings for liturgy and socializing.

- **St. Paul's Parish** (St. Cloud, MN) offers G.I.F.T., Growing in Faith Together, a comprehensive adult-based and family-centered program that incorporates liturgy and instruction and is open to all parishioners.

- **St. Rene Parish** (Sterling Heights, MI) gives families three models to choose from – a traditional program that meets weekly, a family program that meets monthly, and a summer program that is much more intensive than the year-long program.

- **St. Helen and Holy Ghost Parishes** (Gates, NY) are small parishes that offer their programs at different times and have open registration for parishioners of both parishes so families can schedule what is most convenient.

- **Diocese of Fargo Adult Faith Formation** (Fargo, ND) uses a state-wide interactive video network through the North

Table 4

Different Patterns of Catechetical Ministry

How much do you personally work with the following?
Percent responding "Somewhat" or "Very Much":

	Parish DREs	Pastors
Parents of children in sacramental preparation	89%	65%
Families of children in sacramental preparation	58	35
The parish community at times of celebration of sacraments of initiation	54	37
Candidates and catechumens	53	81
Confirmation sponsors	47	28
Parents of infants being baptized	23	67
Godparents of infants being baptized	13	29
Couples preparing for marriage	12	91

Dakota University system in order to maximize the use of scarce catechists and overcome the distance factor in a rural diocese.

- **Prince of Peace** (Plano, Texas) since its inception has focused on total Catholic education. The parish has established a School Board of Total Catholic Education representative of every aspect of education of parish life ministry.

> DREs emphasize the importance of collaboration, both between ministries in a given parish and among parishes.

Adult Formation

In accord with the strong emphasis in the *General Directory for Catechesis* on adult catechesis, most parishes offer a variety of religious education programs geared to adults and give some priority to adult faith formation. The primary parish opportunities for adult catechesis appear to be in RCIA programs and in children's sacramental preparation programs, neither of which have as their primary focus adult catechesis.

- The adults with whom parish DREs and pastors work most frequently are parents of children in sacramental preparation. Compared to DREs, pastors report working more closely with parents of infants being baptized and couples preparing for marriage; DREs tend to work more with parents and families in preparation for first Eucharist, reconciliation and confirmation [See *Table 4*].

- A majority of parish DREs and pastors say their programs help parents further their own understanding of Catholic beliefs, traditions and rituals, but only one fourth of respondents say these

programs are "very" helpful in educating parents. The strong sentiment among many of the focus group participants is that religious educators must do much more with families, and especially parents, to help them in their role as "first catechists," or "domestic Church," in the words of the *GDC*.

- While nearly all parishes offer RCIA programs, less than half of DREs are responsible for these programs. About half of DREs report working with candidates and catechumens, and about four-fifths of pastors report doing so.

- RCIA and adult religious education are two of the top three time-consuming activities for only about one-fourth of parish DREs. On the other hand, nearly three-fifths of diocesan DREs report devoting similarly significant amounts of time to adult education.

- Young adult ministry receives the least attention of all areas at both the diocesan and parish levels.

- Many focus group participants identify family religious education centered on sacramental preparation as an important key for adult catechesis and formation that *"provides them with resources that they can take home to introduce prayer into the things that they do . . . to emphasize to the families that they teach by what they do."*

Training for Catechesis

Diocesan Directors of Religious Education, parish DREs, and pastors agree on the importance of various kinds of training for effective catechesis. However, there are considerable gaps between what catechetical leaders consider important and what is actually required or available at the diocesan and parish levels [See *Table 5*].

- Catechetical leaders at both the diocesan and parish levels strongly emphasize the importance of training for catechists and DREs. As one focus group participant asserts, *"There is research already done. It says that unless you train catechists, you will not have effective programs."* While most diocesan DREs say such training is available in some form, training and/or certification is required in only about half of all dioceses.

- Another overlooked area is the role of the pastor. While 90 percent or more of DREs and pastors consider the pastor's role in catechesis important, only 22 percent of dioceses offer catechetical training for pastors. Focus group participants emphasize the centrality of pastor's role in successful programs: *"[T]he pastor who knows that every aspect of parish life is catechetical is the one that has the most lively programs. And the more the pastor calls people to that, names it for them . . . and points it out to them, you are going to have the best programs all over."*

- Catechetical leaders also consider following curriculum guidelines important for effective catechesis. However, this need has been relatively better met – more dioceses have requirements regarding such guidelines, as well as books and materials, than have requirements for catechist training.

Professional Catechetical Leadership

The budgets for both parish and diocesan DREs are relatively modest. Most budgets are comprised almost entirely of salary costs and have little built-in capacity for more training, resources, or other professional development. Average salary for a full-time diocesan DRE is $33,000, and the average parish DRE salary is $28,000. The 23 percent of parish DREs who work only part-time receive about $15,000. Education levels also differ: more than half of full-time parish DREs have Master's degrees in contrast to only one-third of part-time DREs.

Table 5

Reality Check on Diocesan Training and Resources

Different Perspectives on Training at a Diocesan Level
Percent of Diocesan DREs who indicate the following:

	Important for Catechesis	Diocese Offers	Diocese Certifies or Requires
Training programs for school catechists/religion teachers	98%	74%	64%
Training programs for parish catechists	97	92	51
Training programs for DREs/CREs	96	91	44
Training programs for pastors as chief parish catechists	90	22	n/a
Diocesan curriculum guidelines	88	n/a	59

Figure 1

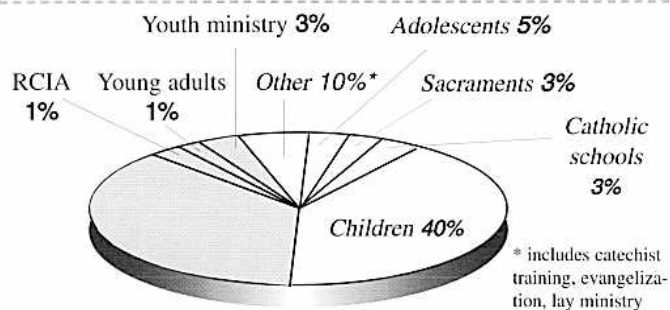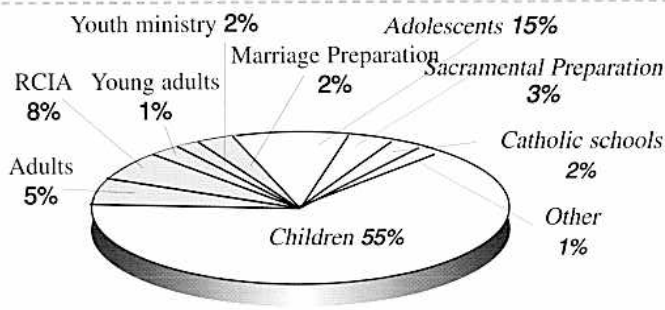### Diocesan DREs: Responsibilities that Take the Most Time

Youth ministry **3%** Adolescents **5%**

RCIA **1%** Young adults **1%** Other **10%*** Sacraments **3%**

Catholic schools **3%**

Children **40%**

* includes catechist training, evangelization, lay ministry

Figure 2

Parish DREs: Responsibilities that Take the Most Time

Youth ministry **2%** Adolescents **15%**

Marriage Preparation **2%** Sacramental Preparation **3%**

RCIA **8%** Young adults **1%**

Adults **5%**

Catholic schools **2%**

Children **55%**

Other **1%**

Almost all diocesan directors of religious education or catechesis report that their offices are responsible for religious education/catechesis for children and for sacramental preparation programs [See *Table 6*]. Almost nine in ten say they are responsible for religious education/catechesis for adolescents as well as for adults. A little more than half of these offices are responsible for religious education/catechesis in Catholic schools or special needs, a third for youth ministry, and less than a quarter for young adult or campus ministry.

More than nine in ten diocesan religious education offices focus their efforts on parish catechesis through training of catechists and DREs/CREs, data gathering, and resource lending. In contrast, about three in four report offering training for school catechists and religion teachers, and less than half gather data on school catechetical ministry. Of those areas taking the greatest amounts of time, diocesan DREs show a three-way split between children's religious education, adult faith formation, and all other areas combined.

In other data some 95 percent of parish DREs say they are responsible for the religious education/catechesis of children and 91 percent say they are responsible for the sacramental preparation of children. Somewhat smaller percentages are responsible for religious education or catechesis for adolescents (80 percent) or for pre-school children (65 percent). Thus, the vast majority of parish directors of religious education indicate that their responsibilities lie primarily in the areas of religious education, catechesis, and sacramental preparation for children and adolescents. They are considerably less likely to be responsible for these areas for adults and particularly young adults [See *Table 6*].

Most parishes have established a formal position for the Director of Religious Education:

- 78 percent of parishes have a job description for the position.

- 54 percent of DREs have a parish contract for their position.

In about 15 percent of parishes, the position of DRE is filled by a volunteer administrator, a priest of the parish, or some other arrangement. Full-time parish DREs have served more years in a catechetical ministry, on average, than have either part-time or volunteer DREs.

- Full-time DREs average 19 years served in catechetical ministry, with an average of eight years in their current position.

- Part-time and volunteer DREs average 15 years of service, with an average of seven years in the current position.

The Next Step

The National Profile of Parish Catechetical Ministry is the next step in this process. This simple web-based format used nationally lets diocesan and parish catechetical leaders put their ministry in the context of the entire Church in the U.S., while respecting diocesan information flows and needs for information pertaining specifically to their parishes. The Profile is being piloted in January 2001.

Table 6

Areas of Responsibility

Percent checking each area:

	Diocesan DREs	Parish DREs
Religious education/catechesis for children	97%	95%
Sacramental preparation for children	95	91
Religious education/catechesis for adolescents	90	80
Religious education/catechesis for adults	85	54
Special needs	55	27
Religious education/catechesis in the Catholic school	55	16
RCIA	46	42
Youth ministry	33	34
Young adult ministry	23	9
Religious education/catechesis for pre-school children	n/a	65
Religious education/catechesis for young adults	n/a	34
Marriage preparation	n/a	10