

Planning Your Catechetical Lesson

Planning is a very important part of your role as a catechist. Because catechists want to assist parents and guardians with handing on the faith in the very best way possible, preparation and planning are essential. So, let's get started with the toughest part ...the nuts and bolts of good lesson planning.



Determine which **standard** is being taught with the lesson. The standards are offered as a set of expectations to reinforce that the most important concepts are being taught at each level. If you know you are going to have more lessons in the book than weeks in the Catechetical Calendar, choose your lessons judiciously, and schedule those that meet the standards so those lessons are taught first. It might also be possible that more than one lesson in the book will meet a given standard, so the option may exist to combine some of the lessons from the book.

Identify the **performance indicators**. The performance indicators include the knowledge you want the children to have and the skills they should be able to display when the lesson has been completed. *Everything* you put into your plan should support the end goal of meeting the standards and performance indicators .

It is important to remember that, at the end of the lesson, you want to know if what you think you taught has actually been learned; therefore, some means of **assessment** or measuring of progress must be determined. You should ask yourself *how* you will know if the children learned the lesson. For example, a catechist for young children might write the following: "The children will be able to name elements of God's creation and tell why they are good gifts from God." To write, "The children will understand God's creation as a gift to us," does not give any concrete means of measuring what has been learned about the concept, so words like understand, feel, grasp, realize, etc. should be avoided. Instead, use action words that give you a concrete way of assessing/measuring progress. Finally, be sure that whatever you plan for the lesson feeds directly into helping you reach the desired performance indicators.

Assessment of learning can be done in a wide variety of ways. In parish faith formation programs, most assessment will be done orally or visually and is carried on continuously throughout a lesson. An alert catechist can see and hear when the children are "on target" with the performance indicators. A truly great catechist is willing to use the assessment to evaluate how well he or she transmitted the information, as well as determining how much was learned by the children. (To learn more about the assessment process, see the information that immediately follows these planning pages.)



Find the pages you will be using in the **catechist's manual** and the corresponding pages in the **learner materials**. Write them into your plan and stick with them. They will also be invaluable to a substitute if an illness or emergency prevents you from being present for the session.



Now that you have identified the performance indicators, know what you are going to teach, where the standard can be found in the materials at hand and how you will assess progress, the fun begins. It is time to think about how you are going to help the children learn the concept.

A **Gathering Activity** can be a real help to a catechist. It gives the children something to do as you wait for all of them to come into the room so you can begin the lesson. The Gathering Activity can be something used to help review past lessons, or to introduce the lesson for the day. It is also a great way to help avoid classroom management problems while you are greeting arrivals at the door. Try setting some books around for reading, a worksheet, a puzzle, a puppet theater area, coloring a banner or some other activity that can be done without instruction from you. Just ask the first child in the room to be your helper and tell others what to do when they arrive.



When the children have arrived and are in place, your lesson should *always begin with prayer*. Have a prayer space arranged and engage the group in the process of gathering around it to hear a Scripture reading and offer prayer. Please take time to plan this. The children will come to recognize prayer as a way to begin all things in life. Do remember though, that this is not the only time for prayer with the group. Incorporate it as often and in as many different forms as your lesson naturally supports.

What **group activities** are you planning on using for your lesson? Will they be designed for everyone to work together, or will they be best done in small groups? If you want everyone to work together, be sure to build that into your activity design. Remember, while every child should feel included, it is best to avoid forcing participation. Gentle encouragement will garner the best results and the children will appreciate your sensitivity. If you are working in small groups, do you need to have assistance from a parent or other helper? Group activities, when carefully planned, are a great way to build community and can help you make a quick assessment of who has mastered the concept you are trying to teach.



Craft projects are those things done to reinforce a concept and often sent home for the children to use as a memory tool for sharing the day's lesson with their families. Handmade treasures are always well received! They let the parents know what you have been working on and enable them to reinforce the concept at home throughout the week. Craft projects should be catechist-tested in advance. There is nothing worse than trying to explain to children what should be done only to find it is too difficult or too confusing for the age level. Both lead to frustration for the catechist and the child...and may even breed dissension among the ranks! Keep crafts simple, have enough materials on hand for everyone (and a guest or two), plan on showing them a completed sample before beginning, and complete another one along with the children as you demonstrate the instructions step by step. The most important thing to remember about crafts is that they are not to be used as a time filler! *The children should know why they are doing the craft and be able to connect it with the lesson for the day.*



Handouts have the potential to be really great things...or really bad things. If you are running off materials to fill time after the lesson or to keep the children busy, then you should probably return to the nuts and bolts of lesson planning and re-think your objective. On the positive side, as Gathering Activities, handouts can provide a great mini review lesson. They can also be used as partner activities to reinforce a concept. Regardless of how you use them, be sure to make enough copies (well in advance of class) for everyone, with a few extras for guests. Because we really don't "grade" things in faith formation, it isn't necessary for children to complete them independently. Handouts can be a great tool for partnering and small groups. They also make great things to send home for sharing with parents.

We all need a little variety to keep us interested. The same is true for children. Be sure to include some **multimedia resources** in your lesson planning. Children like to get up and move, so the right music can really add a lot of reinforcement and provide an opportunity for the children to get up and move around within a structured framework. Sometimes, a video (pre-viewed by the catechist, of course) is a great way to introduce a lesson - or to wrap one up. If time is a problem, try using only a portion of a video to help you illustrate a point. Bible activity computer games are now available. Allowing children to write their own songs about the lesson and perform them using rhythm instruments can be a fun way to reinforce and review. Whatever you choose, prepare in advance, be creative and mix it up a little to keep the children interested.



Know what you need and have it available. A great catechist allows for emergencies...like a lesson that didn't take as long as he or she thought it would. In this instance, having **other materials** on hand is only wise. Be sure to list everything you need for your lesson, and some extras for just-in-case, so you will be well prepared to meet the challenges of the lesson you have planned. Fumbling through without the proper tools is the first way to invite chaos into the classroom. Remember, if you have what you need, there will be no time for tom-foolery.

Parents are the primary catechists and we are available only to assist them with the faith formation of their children. Keep parents informed and give them the opportunity to do what they need to do by **sending materials home** for them to review and use throughout the week. Even materials from lessons that aren't completed, and lessons you know you will not be able to get to during the year, can be sent home for parents to help their children complete. Don't ask for the pages to be returned to you...the parents will know if the children completed them correctly. And they will be thrilled to be involved in what you are doing for their children.



Additional Notes and **Things to Change the next time I teach this lesson** are the places where the catechist takes stock of how well he or she did, how well the children learned and what needs to be done to re-structure the lesson once all that assessment information is taken into account. Although not always easy, it is important for the catechist to be honest with himself or herself if real progress is to be made by everyone involved in the ministry of catechesis.