

Pope Francis renews the ministry of catechist for the New Evangelization

Pope Francis breathes new life into the ancient ministry of catechist in his apostolic letter [*Antiquum Ministerium*](#) ("Ancient ministry"), released this morning by the Vatican, less than two weeks before Pentecost. Issued "*motu proprio*," meaning the letter is signed by and issued on the pope's own initiative, the brief papal document formalizes the lay ministry of a catechist for the universal Church. It also serves to introduce the Rite of Institution of the Lay Ministry of Catechist from the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments.

Just as lay ministers serve as lectors, cantors or extraordinary ministers of holy communion to support the liturgical life of the Church, now the lay ministry of catechist will be recognized formally as a vital support to the evangelizing mission of the Church. Catechists of today are linked to a long chain of faithful men and women who dedicate themselves to initiating, educating, accompanying and forming their brothers and sisters to grow in lifelong friendship with Jesus as members of Christ's body, the Church.

We know these dedicated men and women as catechists of children, teenagers, young adults and adults in our parishes. This papal initiative offers an opportunity to recognize, with gratitude and formational support, those catechists who serve in this esteemed ministry.

The Church exists to evangelize

Arriving within a year of the Directory for Catechesis, which was released by the Pontifical Council for the Promotion of

the New Evangelization last June, this papal letter embodies Pope Francis' desire to revitalize parishes with a fresh evangelizing impulse. Read together with the Directory for Catechesis, the apostolic letter *Antiquum Ministerium* brings the theological and catechetical principles of the third catechetical directory into the heart of everyday parish life by establishing a formal ritual institution of the age-old lay ministry of catechist.

By elevating the lay ministry of catechist, Pope Francis affirms that the evangelizing mission to proclaim Jesus Christ is the sole reason for the Church's existence. In this way, Pope Francis gives concrete pastoral expression to Pope St. Paul VI's teaching that "evangelizing is in fact the grace and vocation proper to the Church, her deepest identity. She exists in order to evangelize, that is to say, in order to preach and teach, to be the channel of the gift of grace, to reconcile sinners to God, and to perpetuate Christ's sacrifice in the Mass, which is the memorial of His death and glorious resurrection" (*Evangelii Nuntiandi* , No. 14).

The pope's initiative may also be viewed as a crowning moment in the Church's pastoral concern for a renewal of catechesis. Since the Second Vatican Council, this focus on catechetical renewal has resulted in the publication of the Catechism of the Catholic Church, the apostolic exhortation *Catechesi Tradendae* ("On Catechesis in Our Time"), three catechetical directories over five decades, and numerous national, regional and diocesan catechisms. A review of key themes in the 11 articles of *Antiquum Ministerium* reveals the pope's pastoral vision as he elevates the ministry of a catechist through a dedicated liturgical rite of the Church.

Catechesis: An ancient ministry

Antiquum Ministerium begins by tracing the ministry of catechist to New Testament writings. Several New Testament passages speak of "teachers of faith" whose specific form of

instruction served to invite, initiate, accompany and educate those seeking to grow in friendship with Jesus Christ within the Christian community. From the beginning, the heart of the Church's catechetical efforts was the invitation to lifelong communion with Jesus Christ.

Since Pentecost, the ministry of catechist built up the faith of believers through an indispensable service, or *diakonia*, for the pastoral care of the Christian community. Before the legalization of Christianity, the rapid spread of Christian faith in the first five centuries was due, in no small part, to the ministry of lay catechists serving in union with bishops, priests, deacons and religious.

For two millennia the Church has been blessed with "certain baptized persons who exercise the ministry of transmitting, in a more organic and stable form, related to different situations in life, the teaching of the apostles and evangelists" (*Antiquum Ministerium*, No. 2). The papal letter locates the ministry of catechist within the "many different forms of ministry carried out by men and women who, obedient to the working of the Holy Spirit, devote their lives to the building up of the Church." This brings to mind St. Paul's image of the one Spirit given in a rich multiplicity of gifts and charisms, such as knowledge, faith, healing, mighty deeds, prophecy and discernment of spirits. Ordained and lay ministries are generous gifts of "but one and the same Spirit [who] produces all of these, distributing them individually to each person as he wishes" (1 Cor 12:11).

Bishops, priests, deacons, men and women in consecrated religious life devoted their lives to catechetical instruction, accompaniment and formation in the Christian way of life. The letter makes special mention of those men and women whose apostolate took the form of religious orders singularly dedicated to catechesis.

Lay Catechists: the 'saints next door.'

Pope Francis highlights the distinctly "secular" character of lay ministries. He notes that catechists build up and strengthen the Christian community by being "expert in the pastoral service of transmitting the Faith as it develops through its different stages from the proclamation of the *kerygma* to the instruction that presents our new life in Christ and prepares for the sacraments of Christian initiation, and then to the ongoing formation that can allow each person to give an accounting of the hope within them" (*Antiquum Ministerium*, No. 6).

Through prayer, study and participation in community life, a lay catechist is called to be, at once, "a witness to the Faith, a teacher and mystagogue, a companion and pedagogue, who teaches for the Church" (*Antiquum Ministerium*, No. 6).

Catechesis is described in the Directory for Catechesis as the ministry that "makes the proclamation of the passion, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ continually resound in the heart of every person, so that life may be transformed. A dynamic and complex reality at the service of the Word of God, catechesis is accompaniment, education and formation in the faith and for the faith, an introduction to the celebration of the Mystery, illumination and interpretation of human life and history" (No. 55).

As catechists have done for 2,000 years, those who serve today as parish catechists offer a vital ministry that nurtures disciples of Jesus on their journeys of faith. In echoing the Church's witness to Jesus as the Way, the Truth and the Life, the ministry of a catechist is a living source of Christian hope and a channel of the transformative power of God's grace so needed by so many in these challenging times.

Our globalized, digital age is marked by rising religious disaffiliation of the young and declining church membership.

Now, as the Church struggles through the impact and uncertainties of a global pandemic, Pope Francis' apostolic letter *Antiquum Ministerium* is a timely reminder of the timeless and transforming joy of the Gospel. It shines a bright light on the faith-filled and joyful ministry of lay catechists who are the "saints next door" serving on the frontlines of the New Evangelization.

Jem Sullivan, Ph.D, teaches catechetics in the School of Theology and Religious Studies at The Catholic University of America. She is the author of four books on catechetical themes from Our Sunday Visitor.