

# THE CONFIDENT CATECHIST

STRATEGIES FOR THE NEW  
AND NOT-SO-NEW VOLUNTEER

LEE DANESCO

Saint Mary's Press®



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The publishing team included Laurie Delgatto, development editor; Lorraine Kilmartin, reviewer; prepress and manufacturing coordinated by the prepublication and production services departments of Saint Mary's Press.

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Printed in the United States of America

Printing: 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Year: 2015 14 13 12 11 10 09 08 07

ISBN 978-0-88489-961-7

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Danesco, Lee.

The confident catechist : strategies for the new and not-so-new volunteer / Lee Danesco.

p. cm.

ISBN-13: 978-0-88489-961-7 (pbk.)

1. Catechists. 2. Christian education—Teacher training. 3. Christian educators. I. Title.

BX1918.D36 2007

268'.3—dc22

2006012736

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# Introduction

Faith teaching and sharing is more than simply transmitting information from one person to another. It requires more than directing young people to read pages and answer questions. As catechist and ministry volunteers, we need to know how to approach young people, how to involve them, and how to organize them in ways that enhance their comprehension, encourage their participation, and enrich their spirituality. *The Confident Catechist: Strategies for the New and Not-So-New Volunteer* is a practical response to these very real needs. It helps volunteers bridge the gap between knowing what to teach and knowing how to teach it.

*The Confident Catechist* includes ten independently written articles geared toward improving the faith-sharing skills of religious education and youth ministry volunteers. Each article explores a specific teaching tool, technique, or outlook. The techniques are not revolutionary or trendy; they are classic and have withstood the test of time in faith-sharing settings.

Reflective questions following each offering help the volunteers apply the message to their own ministry and teaching experience. Designed for time-conscious, results-oriented volunteers (like you!), the articles are compact, direct, and easily read in a single sitting. Because each article can stand alone, no background or preliminary reading is required. Simply select a topic and begin to help yourself to more productive faith-sharing sessions.

# 1

## A Winning Beginning

This is your first day teaching a religious education class. Not only have you never taught a religion class, but you've never taught *anything* to a group of young people. How will you begin?

Or maybe it's your first day teaching this year. You may have led faith-sharing groups for several years now, but each year it seems a little more difficult to start off on the right foot. Maybe this year will be different. How will you begin?

Could it really be your twelfth or thirteenth first-day experience? Sometimes you feel like you have been sharing faith with young people forever. What will you do this year to keep from boring them and yourself? How will you begin?

Because each religious education situation is unique, there are as many good ways to begin a faith-sharing year as there are adult ministry leaders. But all catechist and ministry volunteers facing a new beginning can better direct their energy and improve the likelihood of a successful start with the help of the following basic do's and don'ts.

### **Do Plan to Make a Good First Impression**

The first gathering you have with a new group of young people can be filled with unknowns. You don't know them. They don't know you. They may not even know one another very

well. And no one knows what lies ahead. By making a good first impression, you can relieve the tension of the moment and lay a solid foundation for the remainder of the year. But how do you step into a scenario of such uncertainty and project the image of a calm and competent leader? Plan!

Of course, you will want to familiarize yourself with the objectives of the lesson and review the steps and materials you will use to achieve those objectives in advance. But planning can also mean getting to know about the young people in the group before you ever meet them. An advanced look at a class list can tell you if the group is gender balanced, neighborhood concentrated, or ethnically diverse. Your director of religious education (DRE) or coordinator of youth ministry (CYM) can provide you with helpful information about the young people in the group who may have learning issues or special physical or emotional needs. Being aware of these factors from the beginning can help you relate quickly and sensitively to the faith-sharing potential of the young people in your group.

Finally, the more you know about the teaching environment, the more comfortable you can be. This makes it essential to check out, in advance, the contours and seating arrangement of the meeting space; the location of supply closets, restrooms, and fire exits; and how you can reach the DRE or CYM. By investing just a little time in this kind of advanced planning, you can make a first impression that will help ease the first-day jitters and help you establish a good rapport with your group.

## **Don't Think a Bad First Impression Can Never Be Reversed**

What if the first gathering isn't all you had hoped for? Be ready to put it in proper perspective. Look at the calendar. See how

many more opportunities there will be for you to improve on whatever your first impression might have lacked. One meeting is just that—a single opportunity to share faith. There will be more.

When the first gathering is over, make it a learning tool you can use to improve your efforts. Replay your time with the young people slowly in your mind, pausing and focusing on the good things that happened and making note of successful techniques or approaches you might repeat. You can also reflect on the need for changes by considering what didn't work at all and what might work better if you make some adjustments. Then do what most of the young people did ten minutes after the meeting ended—move on.

## **Do Announce the Basic Code of Conduct**

Are you a tough disciplinarian, a laid-back freewheeler, or someone happily in between? Surprisingly, more important than your management style is your ability to explain clearly what you expect of the group. The first meeting presents the perfect opportunity for you to set out for the young people, in kind but firm language, the basic code of conduct that will help everyone experience a pleasant, productive climate for faith sharing. You might even consider involving the young people in developing a code of conduct. The rules should reflect the general rules of the parish and align with diocesan policies. Of course, the common theme that underlies appropriate behavior at any religious education or youth ministry gathering or event is always Christian respect.

To provide the kind of atmosphere in which spiritual development can happen, the code of conduct should ensure that everyone will be respectful by paying attention, following

directions, and maintaining quiet when asked to do so. Perhaps more difficult, the rules should lead the young people to respect themselves by acting in ways that show they value who they are and what they are doing. You can complete the circle of respect by modeling actions and reactions that acknowledge the dignity and importance you assign to each member of the group.

Young people can relax and work to their potential when they feel comfortable about who is in charge and know what is expected of them. You can relax and work to your potential when you know you have set ground rules that maximize everyone's opportunity to grow in the faith.

## **Don't Be Afraid to Discipline**

When you meet your group of young people for the first time, you will instinctively want to like them, and it is likely that they will feel the same way toward you. But it may not be long before that mutual good feeling is interrupted by someone's forgetfulness, willfulness, unruliness, or just plain silliness. Your reaction to those early challenges to the established rules should reflect your recognition that the young people are coming to you from many different backgrounds and experiences. Some will already have built-in behavior codes; others will not. Some will make mistakes, speak out of turn, and not be predisposed to cooperate or share. And everyone will be experiencing the inherent awkwardness that comes with being part of a new group.

It is appropriate to temper your discipline with good humor, patience, and common sense, but it is essential to be ready and willing to curb and correct inappropriate behavior. This may mean taking a firm stand with a firm voice, restricting



activities, rearranging seats, or denying privileges. It may even mean speaking individually with certain young people about their behavior or working with the DRE or CYM for further disciplinary actions.

We all hope our gatherings will run smoothly with no disciplinary issues, but we all know this will rarely be the case. When difficulties do arise, you may feel reluctant to discipline for fear of alienating a young person. This is a normal reaction, but as the group leader, your primary responsibility is to maintain a safe and enjoyable learning environment for all the young people in the group. Knowing your disciplinary options and applying them calmly, consistently, and fairly will enable you to provide the kind of environment where everyone can enjoy faith-sharing experiences.

## **Do Make That First Lesson Enjoyable**

There is no rule that says learning activities have to be boring. Our faith tells us that we are sharing the most joyful news imaginable. Our lessons, and the manner in which we share them, should reflect that truth.

As a catechist or ministry volunteer, you will likely be expected to follow the direction of your DRE or CYM and share an assigned lesson each time you gather with your group of young people. But lessons and sessions are often simply words on a page. You are the one who can bring that lesson to life and make it seem important to the group, so you must consider in advance how you can enliven and personalize the first session and all the sessions that follow.

What can you say or do to help illuminate the lesson's central truth? What can you add to the lesson to make it real? What part of you can you contribute to this session—a

personal story, a photo, a relevant prayer? How can you lead the young people to connect this lesson to their own lives? Squarely confronting questions like these in advance can help you see the lesson from the group's perspective and make it more user friendly.

## **Don't Make the First Lesson a Three-Ring Circus**

It is natural for you to want to stir up interest and excitement, especially at your first gathering. By looking in resource books or going online, you can find hundreds of fun-filled activity ideas that can add creative dimensions to any meeting. Used properly and sparingly, these teaching tools can help you actively engage the young people. But don't get caught up in your own first-session enthusiasm. If given the option to add such activities to an assigned session, select something simple, time-efficient, and relevant to the lesson. An over-the-top beginning can put you in the unenviable position of needing to produce something spectacular each week, an added pressure that no catechist or ministry volunteer needs to take on. Don't actively seek complications.

## **Some Closing Thoughts**

Whether you are a rookie or a veteran, lots of advice will come your way. Everyone will have a suggestion for you about how to begin. Listen to it all, consider it all, but don't get caught up in it all. Don't worry that you don't know everything there is to know about working with young people. No one does. If you center on these few simple do's and don'ts and rely on

your faith and God's love, you and the young people will have the winning beginning you deserve.

## Think About . . .

1. Try to recall the emotions you experienced as a young person when you were meeting a group of strangers or beginning a new activity. How did you hope the group leader would treat you? Given the ages of the young people you are working with, what unique kinds of fears are they likely to feel? What can you do to minimize their apprehensions?
2. As a catechist or ministry volunteer, what are you most confident about? most concerned about?
3. What three rules will be the most important for you to share with the young people? Think about how you will explain those rules in age-appropriate language and with relevant examples.