

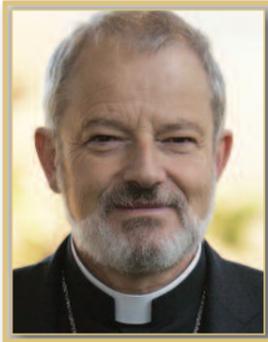
PARTNERS IN THE GOSPEL

The Ministry of Catechist in the Diocese of Elphin



The catechesis of adults is the chief form and model for all catechesis and for faith development at every level in the Church.

Share the Good News, 69

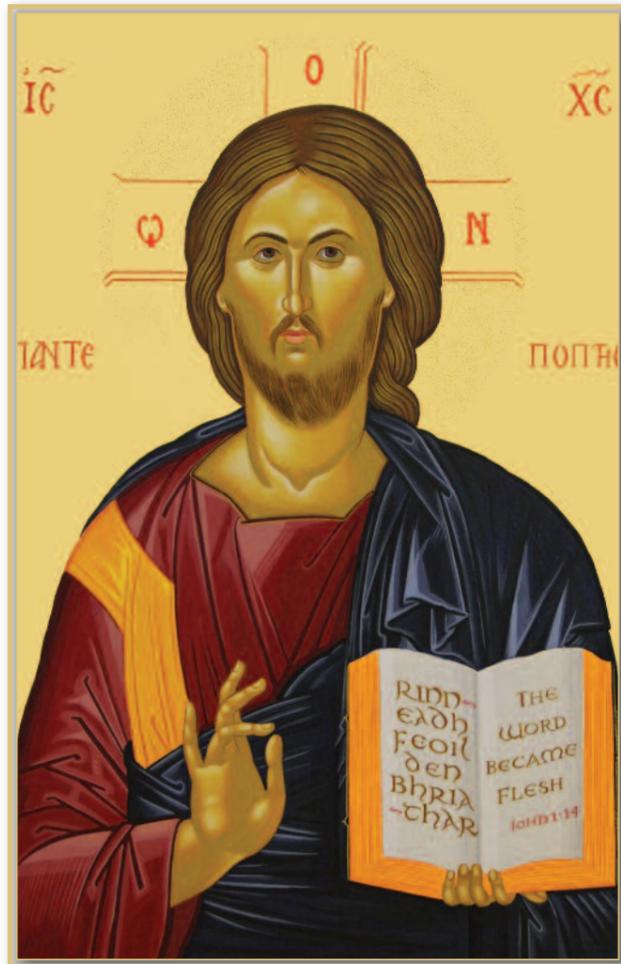


In Ireland today, it often seems that good news is scarce. When it does come, it lifts our hearts for a while and then everything returns to normal. Even for people who believe in Jesus Christ, faith is not thought of as “news” let alone “good news”. This may have something to do with the fact that, while much good work is being done in our parishes, our focus tends to be more on religious practice than on a personal encounter with Jesus Christ. It is Jesus who is the “good news”, because in Him and through His Spirit, the love of God is made concrete and real.

We can continue as we are but, if we do, nothing will change. The Diocese of Elphin is proposing to embark on a new project – Partners in the Gospel – in which men and women of faith will be entrusted with a new mission as volunteer catechists in our parishes. Their mission, in partnership with the priests and others who are active in the life of the parish community, will be to help the whole parish community to move beyond the routine into a deeper lived relationship with Jesus Christ and to become, in the words of Pope Francis, “missionary disciples”.

This will not happen without careful preparation and generosity of commitment. This small booklet outlines in some detail what is proposed. I would ask you to read through it and to consider prayerfully whether this is a service that you might be able to offer, in thanksgiving to God for the gift of faith that you have received. If you cannot see yourself in the role of a catechist, be assured that you do have an important contribution to make by keeping this project in your prayers and by supporting it actively in your own parish community.


Kevin Doran
Bishop of Elphin



Jesus – The Good News

Most people understand that the Gospels according to Matthew, Mark, Luke and John are rooted in the life and ministry of Jesus. Many people will be familiar with the fact that the word “Gospel” means “Good News”, but it may be less clear that the real Gospel is Jesus himself, and not just the writings of the four evangelists. **He** is the “good news”, because in Him the love of God is made concrete and real.

Evangalisation and Catechesis

Evangalisation is about proclaiming in word and action “the good news revealed to us in Jesus Christ, through the grace of the Holy Spirit, that we are loved by God for all eternity”. This is the purpose for which the Church exists. Everything else in the life of a Christian rests on this. (Cf. Share the Good News – STGN - 25)

“Jesus is Lord” was one of the earliest expressions of Christian Faith (cf. 1 Cor. 12:13). Once we have acknowledged that “Jesus is Lord”, the question immediately arises: “how should I respond?” This is where catechesis comes in. Catechesis is about forming people in “the way of the Lord”. In the early Christian period, people had the good news proclaimed to them and then, if they believed, they became catechumens. After an extensive period of preparation including an introduction to the life of the faith community, they would be baptised.

In Ireland, catechesis has traditionally taken place in our Catholic schools and it presupposes that children will already have been introduced to Jesus at home. They will have been taught to pray and to live like disciples in an age-appropriate way. This early evangalisation in the home does not always happen, even for children who have been baptised. This significantly undermines the effectiveness of religious education in the school.

Even in the best of circumstances, however, many young people are only beginning to explore the deeper questions about the meaning of human existence by the time they leave school and formal catechesis comes to an end.

Faith is for a Lifetime

It is no longer realistic, if it ever was, to think that the Catholic schools on their own could provide a formation in faith which would sustain a person through a lifetime of discipleship. We are never too old to learn and most of us go on learning as long as we go on living. When it comes to faith, however, the Sunday homily seems to be the only source of nourishment for many adult Catholics. Even the very best of homilies is limited by time and context. From time to time, at least, something more substantial is needed, both for the good of each individual and also for the life of the Church as a community of faith.

What is required is nothing less than a *New Evangalisation*, which would support men and women of all ages in establishing a mature adult relationship with Jesus and with the community of the Church which is his body. The aim would be to provide them with a more substantial and systematic opportunity to develop a living, explicit and active faith through reflecting together on the Word of God and on the implications of being a disciple.



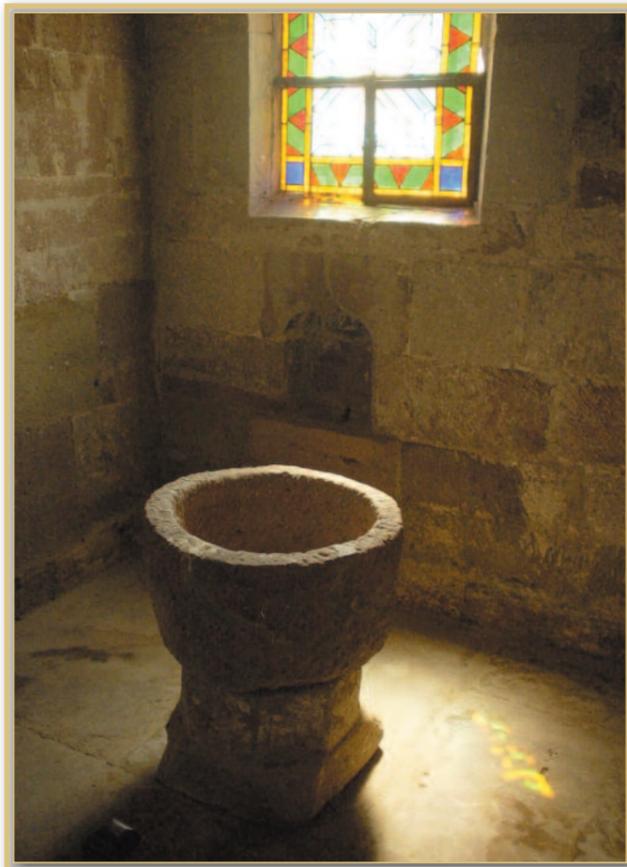
The Ministry of Catechist

The Second Vatican Council set out to restore to the Church something of the richness and diversity of ministry that existed in apostolic times. The lay faithful, as we read in *Lumen Gentium*, have not only the right but the responsibility to play an active part in sharing the Good News. "Through their baptism and confirmation all are commissioned to that apostolate by the Lord Himself." (LG 33) The *Acts of the Apostles* and the Letters of St. Paul indicate that there were people in the various Christian communities who exercised a catechetical ministry alongside the Apostles and this ministry became more structured in later centuries. In many mission territories, in more recent times, the ministry of the catechist has become a well-established form of leadership and service in the Church, not replacing but complementing the ministry of the priest.

It seems that the time has now come to establish the ministry of catechist as part of the life of every parish community in our own diocese. This ministry would be carried out in keeping with the principles and insights set out in the National Catechetical Directory, *Share the Good News*. It would be intended to nourish the faith of those who are already active in their local Christian community; to fan the flame of faith in those who are baptised but have drifted away from the practice of their faith and to proclaim the good news to those living among us for whom Christ and the Church remain unknown or unfamiliar. (cf. STGN, 41)



Faith, of course, cannot be reduced to knowledge, or what is sometimes described as the "deposit of faith". That on its own could be quite sterile.



Baptism and Mission are closely related. The Holy Spirit is given to us for our mission; the same Holy Spirit who descended on Jesus at the river Jordan.

When we look at the vibrant faith of the first Christian communities, we can identify four signs of commitment which are characteristic of Gospel living:

- Proclaiming and witnessing to the Gospel message
- Building up a caring community based on Gospel values
- Celebrating faith in worship, prayer and through liturgical participation – in communion with God, in Jesus Christ and with one another
- Service to neighbour, particularly the most poor and most vulnerable; the work of justice

This dynamic understanding of faith must influence the way in which we prepare for and exercise the ministry of Catechist. (cf. STGN 35; also Acts of the Apostles 2:42-45)

Could I be a Diocesan Catechist?

In his Apostolic Exhortation "Evangelii Nuntiandi" (1975), Pope Paul VI said: "Modern man listens more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if he does listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses." (EN 41)

It seems clear, therefore, that a Diocesan Catechist would need to be able to speak out of the experience of a personal relationship with Jesus and a sense of belonging in the community of the Church. This does not mean that he or she has already achieved perfection or has all the answers.

Those who are called to this ministry will:

- be baptised and confirmed in the Catholic Church,
- be committed to the journey of discipleship within the community of the Church
- be committed to their own formation in faith
- have a desire to share the good news with other men and women
- be able to give the time required for study and service without neglecting the needs of family
- be willing and able to work effectively in partnership with others,
- have the capacity, with appropriate training and formation, to communicate effectively in a pastoral gathering
- be free of involvement in activities or organisations which, in the prudent judgement of the bishop, would be inconsistent with ministry as a catechist
- have the recommendation of their parish priest
- be committed to best practice in safeguarding of children and vulnerable adults, and willing to undergo Garda vetting procedures, in accordance with the Garda Vetting Act

Diocesan Catechists – Discernment and Formation

The time of preparation for the ministry of diocesan catechist will be four years. The formation, which will be part-time, will take place for the most part at weekends (Friday evening and



Saturday). This is a substantial commitment but it will ensure that catechists can undertake this crucial ministry in the life of our diocese with confidence that they have been well prepared.

Preliminary Year

Before he or she is formally accepted as a candidate for the ministry of catechist, an applicant is invited to participate in a period of discernment which is intended to help him or her arrive at a better self-understanding and to come to a decision as to whether being a diocesan catechist would be consistent with his or her gifts, professional commitments and family responsibilities. Some of the courses which take place during this period will be geared towards vocational discernment while others will begin the academic formation for ministry as a catechist.

The period of discernment incorporates the formal application process. It affords all those involved the opportunity to arrive at some initial evaluation of the potential of the applicant as a candidate for ministry as a catechist. In the light of that evaluation, the bishop will invite successful applicants to proceed to the first year of the formation programme.

Academic Formation

The academic formation for those who continue as candidates for the ministry of diocesan catechist will consist of the successful completion, over three years, of a Diploma in Lifelong Religious Education (NQF Level 8) accredited by St Angela's College, Sligo (NUI Galway).

This will involve the study of core theological disciplines including the human search for meaning and purpose in life; scripture, systematic theology (God, religion, who Christ is, what communities of faith are); moral theology (the implications of faith for relationship and for action), liturgy (how faith communities celebrate their faith); spirituality, the history of Christianity, ecumenism, world religions and secular viewpoints as well as relevant elements of philosophy. The programme will also include modules related to the history, theory and practice of Religious Education across the human life cycle along with teaching methodologies and communications skills.

Assessment for the *Diploma in Lifelong Religious Education* will be by course work, group work and participation in educational placements. At the end of the three year programme candidates will also be required to complete for the diocese a comprehensive assessment of their learning over the three-year period.

Pastoral Formation

Each year the catechist formation programme will include educational placements in a variety of contexts within a parish or deanery.

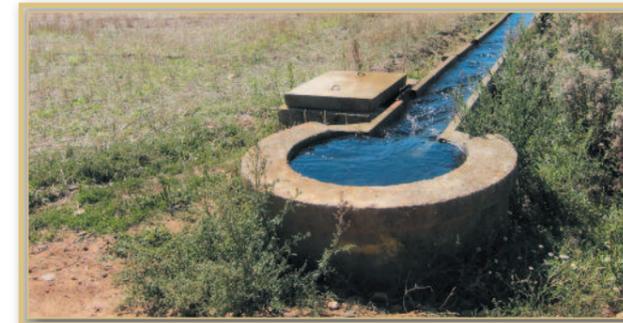
Such placements will assist the candidate in applying their academic learning to a variety of different contexts and developing the knowledge, attitudes and practical skills required for ministry as a catechist.

Spiritual Formation

In the course of their formation, candidates will be helped to nourish their own faith, both through prayer and liturgical celebration in common and through exposure to the rich spiritual tradition of the Church. The formation programme will include a short annual retreat. Candidates will be expected to have a spiritual director, with whom they meet regularly and who will support them on their own journey of faith.

Personal Growth

Through their participation in the programme, candidates will be helped to develop their communication skills and their capacity to work constructively as members of a team. They will be invited to explore this process with the programme director and facilities will be provided for personal and ministerial supervision, both during the formation period and during their ministry.



Conditions of Service

Some Catechists may be employed by a parish or by a group of parishes, but what we envisage in most cases is a part-time voluntary ministry, carried out by lay people who are specifically formed for the task. While it is true that many parishes could not afford to employ a Catechist, the voluntary nature of this ministry is not simply about cost. It is also about inviting parishioners to be active in the life of their own faith community and to share generously with others the good news and the hope that they themselves have received. All the costs of formation will be borne by the Diocese of Elphin and expenses incurred by catechists in the exercise of their ministry will also be covered.

On completion of the formation programme, Diocesan Catechists will be formally entrusted with their mission by the bishop. They will be invited to commit initially for a five year period. A review will take place towards the end of that period, in the context of which each catechist will be invited to meet the bishop and to discuss whether or not he or she is in a position to commit for a further period.

One essential dimension of the mission of the Diocesan Catechist is that it will be exercised in communion with priests, deacons, the pastoral council and others who are actively engaged in the life of the parish. While respecting the uniqueness of each parish community, it will also be important that the Diocesan Catechists would have a vision which extends beyond the boundaries of the parish and enables them to support one another as the circumstances require.

While it is not intended that the Catechist would in any sense replace the teacher in the classroom, he or she would certainly have a role in supporting parents in sharing faith with their children and in the parish element of Sacramental preparation.

It is envisaged that, once catechists have been entrusted with their mission, the Bishop will determine, in consultation with them, one or two specific catechetical projects for each year, which would be offered in each parish or parish cluster. This would allow for the development of resource materials and other aids for the catechists, and would help to ensure that the diocese as a whole would be engaged in a coherent journey of learning. For their own growth and in order to retain their accreditation, Catechists will be required to participate in a modest ongoing formation process, incorporating academic, spiritual and pastoral elements, which will be provided by the diocese at no cost to the catechist.



Opportunities should be provided for young adults, specifically, to be introduced to, or grow in, personal faith and spirituality. This is a time in their lives when other personal choices are being made. ... Opportunities must be provided, therefore, to encourage them to celebrate and live their Christianity, and come to know its fullest meaning in their lives and the significance of its contribution to the cultural world within which they live.

(Share the Good News, 76)



*I thank my God every time I remember you.
In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy
because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now,
being confident of this, that he who began a good work in
you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.*

(Philippians 1:3-6)



Enquiries:

Further information may be obtained by contacting:

Rev Dr. Michael Duignan,
St. Mary's, Temple St., Sligo

Tel.: 087 6894467

071-9150106

Email: mgduignan@gmail.com