



An appropriate adult Eucharistic catechesis stresses the nature of the Eucharist as gift.

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On a Journey Together: Accompanying Others to Faith

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As Pope Francis lays out a vision of bringing people to faith through relationship in *The Joy of the Gospel*, he uses the word *accompany*. Early in the exhortation, he speaks of “pastors and the lay faithful who accompany their brothers and sisters in faith or on a journey of openness to God” (44). In that paragraph, he continues to speak of “mercy and patience” as part of accompanying another. This accompaniment, he states, can be a “radical and attractive witness” of love (99). The type of accompaniment that Pope Francis has in mind calls us to look with reverence upon other people as we approach them and begin a relationship with them.

Ordained ministers and other pastoral workers can make present the fragrance of Christ’s closeness and his personal gaze. Priests, religious, and laity all need to be initiated—into this “art of accompaniment” that teaches us to remove our sandals before the sacred ground of the other (see Exodus 3:5). The pace of this accompaniment must be steady and reassuring, reflecting our closeness and our compas-

sion, which also heals, liberates, and encourages growth in the Christian life. (169)

This article focuses on the value and practicalities of approaching adult catechesis in the parish through an accompaniment model, with the goal of cultivating a deeper appreciation and understanding of the Eucharist. Clearly, for Pope Francis, all the baptized need to view accompanying others to faith as part of their mission. But what does it mean to accompany another? Accompaniment involves intentional relationship building, which leads to deeper conversion and discipleship. Those who accompany others, *The Joy of the Gospel* notes,

- have an initial focus on people, not propositions (for example, doctrines and dogmas)
- cultivate relationships built on respect, love, and trust
- offer a credible witness of faith. (169–171)

The pope’s vision of accompaniment is an interpersonal one, involving people going out to meet others where they are in life (or where they are on their faith journey), and offering to

them a credible witness of Christ's love. This witness of faith is compassionate, nonjudgmental, morally positive, and is enriched by one's story of encountering Christ. Accompaniment moves gradually from personal witness and the sharing of faith stories to an understanding and encounter with the mysteries of faith (for example, catechesis and the sacraments). In other words, accompaniment demonstrates to others that not only does Jesus love them, but that you do too.

In the New Testament, we hear of people accompanying one another on a journey of faith. For many people, the account of the disciples meeting Jesus on their way to Emmaus comes to mind. Less referenced is the story in Acts 10:1–48 that features the most unlikely friendship between the Roman centurion Cornelius and the Apostle Peter.

Both the Emmaus account and the one in Acts include the same elements of accompaniment: (1) prayer and the Spirit's activity, (2) going out to the peripheries, (3) seeking common ground, (4) testimonies of faith, and (5) sacramental celebration and meal sharing. As the biblical narrative is examined, each of these elements will be considered.

PRAYER AND THE SPIRIT'S ACTIVITY

At the beginning of Acts 10, we meet the centurion Cornelius, who although a Roman, is "God-fearing," gives alms generously to the people, and prays to God constantly (v. 2). While in prayer, Cornelius has a vision of an angel of God, who instructs him to send messengers to the Apostle Peter.

The day after the messengers are dispatched, Peter, while at prayer (v. 9), has a vision of a variety of unclean animals and is instructed to kill and eat them (v. 13). As Peter discerns the meaning of this vision, the messengers arrive. Next, "the Spirit" commands Peter to accompany the messengers (v. 20). The root word for "accompany" here is *poreuomai*, which suggests that Peter is to "go with" or "journey with" the newly arrived messengers. Upon greeting the messengers, Peter is told of their master's vision and is asked to follow them back to their home. Peter agrees and brings with him "some of the brothers from Joppa" (v. 23).

The centurion and Peter are worlds apart in terms of their cultures and covenantal standing; yet, they will be united by their prayerful response to the Spirit's promptings. Their approaches to prayer are similar in that each man is open to the Spirit as a dynamic companion is capable of communicating God's will through visions. What's more, Cornelius and Peter are open to receiving the inspiration of the Spirit.

The work of catechesis and, in particular, adult catechesis, begins with a discernment of how and where God's Spirit is at work in our lives and helping others to do the same. Knowing that catechesis begins with the inspiration of the Spirit, the catechist can find the courage to do what later may seem difficult or impossible.

GOING OUT TO THE PERIPHERIES

Peter, led by the Spirit, arrives at Cornelius' home and greets his household with the reminder that it is contrary to Jewish law to "associate with, or visit, a Gentile" (v. 28). Peter shares with Cornelius that he is transgressing the law because he has



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Those who accompany meet people where they are on their faith journey.

come to understand that God does not call anything or any person "unclean."

This is an incredible development in Judeo-Christian thought and an incredible lesson for adult catechists. As Pope Francis has noted in *The Joy of the Gospel* (21, 24, 87, 97, and 120), the Church—and this includes all the baptized—are called to be missionaries who "go out" to all (without reserve or prejudice) and share the Good News. Pope Francis points out that catechists, as evangelizers, are called to share the kerygma:

In catechesis too, we have rediscovered the fundamental role of the first announcement, or kerygma, which needs to be the center of all evangelizing activity and all efforts at Church renewal. . . . This first proclamation is called "first" not because it exists at the beginning and can then be forgotten or replaced by other more important things. It is first in a qualitative sense because it is the principal proclamation, the one which we must hear again and again in different ways, the one which we must announce one way or another throughout the process of catechesis, at every level and moment. (164)

The "peripheries" or "mission fields" are all around us. They are our families, workplaces, communities, and perhaps especially our parishes. Gone is the time when one could presume that those attending Mass are the "faithful" in the truest sense of that word: that they, in fact, are "full of faith."

That Francis feels inclined to remind the Church that "the Eucharist, although it is the fullness of sacramental life, is not a prize for the perfect but a powerful medicine and nourishment for the weak" (47), speaks volumes. At the very least, it implies that he considers that there are those among the "faithful" who feel special or more privileged than those who do not receive Communion (for example, those who may choose not to receive; those who might be absent from Mass or have, in fact, disaffiliated from the Church; those who, according to the Church, are unsuited to receive).



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Establishing common ground is essential when accompanying another.

Pope Francis goes on to decry any practice that would have some “act as arbiters of grace.” He states, “The Church is not a tollhouse; it is the house of the Father, where there is a place for everyone, with all of their problems.” The Church, then, is not a place that collects payment for grace conferred. An appropriate adult Eucharistic catechesis stresses the nature of the Eucharist as gift. Our prayer in the Liturgy of the Eucharist reminds us that this gift is from God’s love. At no point are we ever worthy of God’s love and mercy; we are sinners.

SEEKING COMMON GROUND

Upon Peter’s entering Cornelius’ home, the centurion falls at the Apostle’s feet to worship him as a god or demigod. (While this gesture may seem bizarre today, ancient Rome was polytheistic, and even the emperors were worshipped as gods.) Peter declines Cornelius’ worship, saying, “Get up. I myself am also a human being” (v. 26).

This text offers us yet another element of an accompaniment model for adult catechesis: seeking common ground. Discovering what makes human beings the same is not to downplay or disregard our individual uniqueness. In fact, drawing attention to our individuality is critical. However, seeking common ground provides a baseline for sharing significant life experiences as well as knowledge and experiences of faith.

Promoting what two (or more) people have in common makes manifest the universal scope of Christian faith. Moreover, Jesus’ prayer at the Last Supper in which he calls for a unity among believers “so that they may all be one, as you, Father, are

in me and I in you” (John 17:21) should signal that seeking common ground is a necessary step toward such unity.

Although the sharing of personal stories, values, and beliefs is not new to adult catechesis, it often is overlooked. Catechists must know something about those who are to be catechized, as well as allow themselves to be known (for example, who the person is behind the ministry). To know someone is to know where they have been, where they think they are now, and where they hope to go. This includes what people value and what they believe in, as well as what (or whom) they do not value and what they do not believe in. In other words, adult catechesis within an accompaniment model must begin with the human story. One aspect of this story is that we are all sinners, yet we are loved by God.

Pope Francis portrayed the accompaniment model in his 2013 interview with *America* for the article, “A Big Heart Open to God.” When the interviewer asked the Holy Father, “Who are you?” he answered, “I am a sinner.” He added that, like all of us, he is a sinner who is loved by God. In effect, Francis identified himself with the most common of denominators. Every one of us is a sinner loved by God. All of us, especially catechists, would do well to remember this as we strive to accompany others.

Such a perspective keeps in the forefront of our evangelical/ catechetical efforts the truth that we are not better, greater, or holier than others. We are only who we are. Such humility will help one to be more sensitive to the needs of others. Often when people are beginning their faith journey, they need a listening and compassionate heart, not a catechetical lesson.

TESTIMONIES OF FAITH

Acts 10:30–33 includes Cornelius’ testimony of the powerful experience of the Spirit that he had four days earlier. He describes the vision to Peter, beginning with the appearance of “a man in dazzling robes” (the angel of the Lord), who told him that his offerings and prayers had been remembered and heard by the Lord, and that the Spirit had commanded him to send for Peter. Cornelius thanks Peter for coming to meet with him and notes that because his household is now together, “here in the presence of God” (v. 33), they are ready to hear all that Peter has “been commanded by the Lord” (v. 33).

For his part, Peter is moved to share his interpretation of the vision he had—an interpretation that appears to be inspired by Cornelius’ prior testimony. The spontaneity of Peter’s interpretation is evidenced by his opening remark, “Truly I understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him” (vv. 34–35). Next, Peter connects his new understanding to the kerygma he already knows and believes. Peter’s kerygmatic catechesis begins by recalling Jesus’ baptism, his public ministry, and Crucifixion. He continues by citing his experiences of meal sharing with the Risen Jesus, the one about whom “all the prophets bear witness” (v. 43). By connecting his experience of the Spirit and his interpretation of it to the kerygma, Peter is able to conclude that “everyone who believes in him [Jesus] will receive forgiveness of sins through his name” (v. 43).

At the heart of catechesis within an accompaniment model are helping people articulate their testimonies of faith

and demonstrating their connection or development out of the kerygma. The dialogue between Cornelius and Peter shows how another's faith testimony can shed light on our experiences of God. Once one is able to see one's story within the context of God's saving plan, one tends to be more open and eager to do God's will (for example, pray, worship, keep God's Commandments, serve others, etc.). What new insights might we have if we were to prayerfully connect our stories of faith to the kerygma?

SACRAMENTAL CELEBRATION AND MEAL SHARING

The final verses of this chapter from Acts report that the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard Peter's catechesis. The circumcised followers of "the way" who had traveled with Peter were amazed that the gift of the Holy Spirit was poured out on the Gentiles (v. 45), which was evidenced by the fact that they were "speaking in tongues and glorifying God" (v. 46). As a result of this, Peter declares "Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people, who have received the Holy Spirit even as we have?" (v. 47). With that, Peter commands that Cornelius and his household be baptized; and he remains with them for several days.

We find in Acts 11:3 that Peter had eaten (at least once) with Cornelius and his household while he had stayed there. This was yet another action contrary to Jewish law. A subset of the Pharisees in Jerusalem known as the "circumcision party" criticized Peter for flouting the law. The party included people who believed that circumcision remained requisite for salvation. In their opinion, Gentiles would need to become Jews before they could be considered disciples and counted among the righteous of God.

While we are not explicitly told that the meal(s) Peter shares with Cornelius' household is a celebration of the Lord's Supper, the Acts of the Apostles reports in multiple places (2:46; 20:7; 27:35) that the disciples celebrated the Lord's Supper daily, and especially on Sunday, which was known as the "first day of the week." I do not wish to speculate here, only to suggest that meal sharing is a critical element of accompaniment. It foreshadows the Eucharist—the heavenly banquet to which Christ invites all. And sharing our food with others recalls the mercy of God, of which the cross is the definitive sign.

Of all the elements of our accompaniment model, sacramental celebration and meal sharing, together, are the most Eucharistic. The sacraments flow from the Eucharist, and each is an encounter with the Risen Lord. In addition, Christianity, with its Jewish roots, acknowledges and perpetuates meal sharing as an invitation from one to another into a life of deep friendship. An accompaniment model, then, aims to deepen understanding and appreciation of the Eucharist and should include moments of meal sharing that lead up to and follow sacramental celebrations, be they celebrations of initiation or another kind.

PRACTICAL POINTS

The accompaniment model explained here emphasizes the missionary dimension of catechesis, along with the importance of encounter and presence, which can aid the deepening of one's understanding and appreciation of the Eucharist.



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To guide parishioners in the accompaniment model, provide questions at gatherings so that those sharing a meal will also have an opportunity to share their lives.

Meal sharing in parishes occurs frequently: Advent reflection breakfasts/suppers, Lenten communal penance suppers, and Friday fish fry dinners, funeral/wedding receptions, and meals for the homeless, just to name a few. To make such occasions more conducive to accompaniment, consider adding (where appropriate) the elements of prayer, small sharing groups, time for greetings and table introductions. Prepare questions ahead of time that will help participants share something about themselves and, later, share around a topic of faith or a reading from the Lectionary. What is most important in the accompaniment model is a prayerful disposition, a willingness to get to know others, listen to them, and share one's life/faith story with them. ♦

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