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Signature:

Anthony M. Butler

Date

Cultivating the Domestic Church:
Experimenting with Family Catechetical Education

By

Anthony M. Butler
Doctor of Ministry

Candler School of Theology

Susan Bigelow Reynolds, PhD.
Project Consultant

Jennifer R. Ayres, PhD.
Director of DMin Program

Abstract

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Catechetical education—alternately referred to as religious education or catechesis—has long mirrored traditional classrooms separated by age and grade. Furthermore, religious education has failed to engage parents in the process, and therefore little reinforcement occurs outside the classroom setting. Parents must also be equipped to share faith with their children. Therefore, I propose that a model of family catechesis is necessary to help families grow together in faith. The program I designed incorporates the Gospel lesson from Sundays using a multi-modal approach including pictures, art, stories, active movement, and reflection and prayer. Through this process families are empowered to take greater responsibility for their children's education and faith formation, which is strongly supported by the Church. Ultimately, the goal is to ensure that faith is transferred with authenticity wherein disciples are formed who take the mission of the Church to heart and apply it to their lives. I propose this is best done within, and not separated from, the family.

Cultivating the Domestic Church:
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By

Anthony M. Butler

Siena Heights University, B.A., 2004
Catholic Theological Union, M.A., 2012

Project Consultant: Susan Bigelow Reynolds, Ph.D.

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Introduction

In the fields and prairies of the rural Midwest, families are closely bound to one another, to the land, and to their faith. These attributes may be assigned to St. Augustine Catholic Church in Rensselaer, Indiana. It is in the home where mothers and fathers, children, and even grandparents come together to grow as families of faith. They are knit together out of necessity due to the demands of the land and the livelihood it provides. Families are deeply affected by the changing seasons and weather patterns, the change of tastes, and the futures market regarding agriculture. They challenge one another to grow into the persons God calls them to be. These bonds are forged from a mutual self-giving which enables each member to express his or her fullest self. There is a recognition that what happens to one impacts the whole. Essentially, to be family means to rise and fall together in all aspects of life.

Amid these family realities, especially in this rural context, the Church plays an important role. As Pope Francis reminds us, “the Church is a family of families, constantly enriched by the lives of all those domestic churches.”¹ Generations of families comprise the parish, and the interrelatedness of families cannot be overlooked. This presents challenges while also opening possibilities. When programs are offered for families to be involved there is a greater response. Families want to be part of the life of the parish together. This most commonly comes in the form of participation at Mass, when multiple members of families serve various liturgical roles at the same liturgy. Unfortunately, there has been a great divide when it comes to education.

¹ Pope Francis, Apostolic Exhortation on Love in the Family *Amoris Laetitia* (19 March 2016), at The Holy See, http://w2.vatican.va/content/dam/francesco/pdf/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20160319_amoris-laetitia_en.pdf, § 87.

Roman Catholicism places an emphasis on the role of parents as the primary educators of their children. It is such an important concept that it is written in both the catechism and in Canon Law.² Therefore, pastors and parish communities must be focused on and act as centers for helping parents to teach the faith to their children. Whether it is called faith formation or religious education (the term the parish has used consistently for many years) or catechesis, the process of helping individuals and the community to understand their faith is inadequate at St. Augustine. This is true of many parishes, especially those in thinly-stretched rural areas. I will follow Thomas Groome and use the term, ‘catechetical education’ as it better represents what we are doing in the parish.³ We use a variety of approaches to instruct, but we also form youth in the faith and traditions of the Roman Catholic Church through prayers, activities, and events. The parish has always been intimately linked with education, beginning as a chapel in an orphanage and manual training school. There does not appear to be a lack of desire for education and formation, but practices have not always been consistent with the variety of changes in the parish and wider community.

Religious education has been reduced to mostly a program for first through ninth grade youth. Senior high students participate in youth group and a leadership development program known as Peer Ministers. There has been nothing consistent for adults in many years, although there is a committee—the Evangelization Committee—confronting that issue. As for young

² Catholic Church, *Catechism of the Catholic Church: Revised in Accordance with the Official Latin Text Promulgated by Pope John Paul II*, 2nd ed. (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1997), no. 2223; See also Canon 226, paragraph 2 in “Code of Canon Law - Book II - The People of God - Part I. (Cann. 208-329),” accessed December 21, 2019, http://www.vatican.va/archive/cod-iuris-canonici/eng/documents/cic_lib2-cann208-329_en.html#TITLE_II.

³ Thomas H. Groome, “Total Catechesis/Religious Education: A Vision for Now and Always,” in *Horizons & Hopes: The Future of Religious Education*, ed. Thomas H. Groome and Harold Daly Horell (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2003), 1.

adults (18-35 years old) and families with children, the only offering is Sunday Mass. Though these challenges are difficult for catechesis, they are not extreme. As the director of faith formation at St. Augustine, I determined that the parish should move from a strictly religious education model, where there is one catechist to a class, to a model that involves whole families in faith formation. This new process of family catechetical education is what was piloted in Fall 2019. Changes in the family structure, the cultural composition of the parish, and the generationally segregated nature of religious education itself make whole-family faith formation a challenge. Yet the experience of the family catechetical education pilot program at St. Augustine suggests that, despite the persistence of these obstacles, families are willing to face their uncertainty and engage in the program when they know from the beginning that what is being done is experimental yet fundamental. In other words, there was a willingness to cultivate faith together as all involved knew at the outset we were walking into a bit of the unknown.

Context

Before looking more specifically at family catechetical education, it is helpful to outline the context in which this project takes place. St. Augustine Catholic Church was organized as part of the Diocese of Fort Wayne in 1881, but its history goes back to 1867. In that year, an orphanage and training school were established just south of Rensselaer. It was an initiative of the bishop, John Luers, who had purchased a farm a few years earlier. The orphanage and eventually the nearby Indian Normal School were both named after St. Joseph, with the orphanage site later becoming the campus of Saint Joseph's College. The choice of the name, St. Augustine, for the parish, has been lost to history. Since 1888, like St. Joseph's College, it has been under the leadership of the Missionaries of the Precious Blood (C.P.P.S.).

Rensselaer lies in the heart of Jasper County which has a total population of about 34,000 people. With nearly 6,000 people, Rensselaer is by far the largest town as well as serving as the county seat. It was founded in 1834, by primarily German immigrants. It was named for its founder, James Van Rensselaer.⁴ The Catholics who came to this area were therefore also of mostly German heritage. The surrounding muddy marshland—part of what is known as the Grand Kankakee Marsh, was considered undesirable land to many. The German immigrants, along with many Dutch settlers who came at that time, knew better than many others how to drain the land and make it useful for farming.

The economy is agriculturally based, along with services in support of county government. Therefore, there are many law offices in Rensselaer. There is a small airport used primarily by crop dusters and those who desire a more efficient inspection of their fields. Additionally, there are several hobbyists who fly into and out of Jasper County Airport as it is a good place to fuel their planes before flying over major cities like Chicago and Indianapolis. It holds commercial potential, but not likely to ever service passengers on any large scale. Rensselaer has one supermarket and two smaller grocery stores. The Wal-Mart is not “super” nor is it open twenty-four hours a day.

Prior to suspension of operations, the economy was bolstered by Saint Joseph’s College with its 200 employees and nearly 1000 students. The loss of revenue has been felt by shops and restaurants, but even amid the loss, three new restaurants have opened. There is a team hoping to repurpose the college facilities to host new educational opportunities, but it unlikely to have the number of well-paying jobs it did, nor will the numbers of students patronizing businesses return to their former numbers.

⁴ Van Rensselaer was born in upstate New York to a prominent family who were original Dutch landholders of what became Rensselaer County, New York.

Demographic Data

If one only observed Sunday Mass at the parish, it would look like an aging and elderly community. However, the median age of St. Augustine Church is 45, and the largest subgroup of members is between 46 and 55 years old. Comparatively, the median age of the population of Rensselaer is 41.8.⁵ Although 21% of membership is sixty years of age or older, 23% of registered parishioners are eighteen and under.⁶ Faith formation like family catechetical education is a means for bridging this gap. According to a brief survey that was conducted by parish leadership, many older folks expressed that the parish school was a point of pride. People want to invest in the youth even if they are not biologically related to them. Here, too, is another point to be made in favor of the implementation of family catechetical education.

Currently, almost 10% of the church's registered population identifies as Hispanic/Latino. This is likely an underestimate of those who are either worshipping with the community on Sundays (Mass is only offered in English) or have children enrolled in religious education. It is countercultural for many Hispanic families to register with a parish; many people avoid registration because they are undocumented and fear any listing of their names. This causes delays in both education and sacramental preparation.⁷ It is also not typical in parishes in Latin America to register because it simply comes with being born in a place. Brett Hoover asserts that "we must recognize that in Hispanic Catholicism, the parish is not necessarily the

⁵ U. S. Census Bureau, "American FactFinder - Results," accessed December 2, 2017, <https://factfinder.census.gov/faces/tableservices/jsf/pages/productview.xhtml?src=CF>.

⁶ St. Augustine Church, "Member Statistical Information" from *Parish Database* (Rensselaer, IN: St. Augustine Church, 2017).

⁷ For more information regarding Hispanic ministry see Hosffman Ospino, "Hispanic Ministry in Catholic Parishes: A Summary Report of Findings from the National Study of Catholic Parishes with Hispanic Ministry" (Boston, MA: Boston College School of Theology and Ministry, 2014), https://www.bc.edu/content/dam/files/schools/stm/pdf/2014/HispanicMinistryinCatholicParishes_2.pdf.

only or even the primary locus of Catholic identity and faith formation.”⁸ Family catechetical education honors each member of the family by meeting them wherever they are in their faith development. Families are empowered to help one another, and the parish acts as facilitator of the process. Nevertheless, there has been an effort to register families at the same time they enroll their children for religious education.

Community Assets

There are many community organizations in Rensselaer with whom the parish is in partnership. Saint Joseph’s College is included, even though its future is uncertain. The people of St. Augustine will undoubtedly be part of that future just as they have always been part of its story. They two are intimately connected. Other organizations with which the parish partners and helps to sustain our community are represented through strong connections to our members. The Knights of Columbus—I was recently invited to consider membership—have made many contributions to our parish, to our school, and to a home for individuals with disabilities. Additionally, they have a scholarship fund and they support foreign missions. Their charitable contributions are supported almost exclusively by the profits from the meals they serve at their hall.

Another major partnership is with Birthright Rensselaer. Birthright offers services to women who face unplanned pregnancies. They do not use coercion or scare tactics, but present facts, educate, and help with whatever services are necessary to help serve life. The chapter was established in 1988 by a parishioner, and she continues to be its principal organizer. Many other members from the parish serve regularly with this all-volunteer organization.

⁸ Brett Hoover, “Ministry with Hispanic Young People in Parish Life,” in *Our Catholic Children: Ministry with Hispanic Youth and Young Adults*, ed. Hosffman Ospino (Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor, 2018), 54.

The Good Samaritan Food Pantry began in the basement at St. Augustine in the early 1980s. It became a collaborative outreach of several churches, and now it is a stand-alone 501(c)(3) organization. The parish provides volunteers and material and financial support to the food pantry. It is open Tuesdays and Thursdays and the third Saturday of each month. On the second Saturday morning of every month, the Bridge Assemblies of God Church host their own food pantry.⁹ We have had no affiliation with the Bridge. I am unsure if they have any other partnerships with local churches.

Finally, the parish has long had a solid partnership with the local hospital. From 1912 until 2015, it was a public hospital overseen by the county. In August 2015, Jasper County Hospital became Franciscan Health Rensselaer after it was purchased by Franciscan Healthcare, Inc., of Lafayette, Indiana. It was founded in 1876, by the Sisters of St. Francis of Perpetual Adoration. The fact that the hospital is now sponsored by Catholic sisters has strengthened the relationship. Furthermore, the Vice President is rather charismatic, and he and his wife became members of the parish. The previous CEO was already a member of the parish—though not Catholic—along with his wife.

The context in which the church exists is one that has been incredibly stable over decades and many generations are bound to the parish. The context, however, is shifting. Reliance on family farming and the agricultural industry needs fewer and fewer people as technology changes. One farmer south of town has robotized his entire planting and harvest operations. Family dynamics change too, which has increasingly affected the parish. While single-parent households are prevalent, the increased number of households with cohabiting parents presents another challenge. Additionally, the economy demands that more and more families have both

⁹ The Bridge does not desire outside assistance with their food pantry. When I was at Saint Joseph's College, many students sought to assist there and were either ignored or were told they weren't needed.

parents, where such dynamics exists, working outside the home.¹⁰ Inevitably, religious education and faith formation is not always prioritized. Therefore, another approach is necessary.

Family Catechetical Education in Theory

The idea of family catechetical education is not a new concept. It has been done in many parishes, although there is little data detailing when and where. There are practitioners who have detailed some ideas here and there, and others have shared their experiences within a parish. There is strong theoretical support for the methodology, but change is slow, and family dynamics—increased split families, increase in single-parent households, religiously mixed families, etc.—likely play a greater role in determining the methods parishes use when catechetical education is offered. Many programs are conducted by a host of volunteers and the use of a ready-made curricula removes much of the burden of planning and training necessary for innovation. It is necessary to heed what other scholars have done and are doing, and to consider what might be the hesitation of a parish community.

Family can be defined in many ways, and to limit the definition is to run the risk of giving priority to a particular type and to undervaluing others. That is a caution this project hopes to avoid, but some type of guideline is necessary. Brenda Snailum writes, “family is best understood as a complex interrelated system, and the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.”¹¹ Although religious educators and pastoral ministers may not readily think of families as systems, it allows for a degree of objectivity to help undergird the project overall. Families are relational

¹⁰ For more information regarding family dynamics see Gretchen Livingston, *The Changing Profile of Unmarried Parents* (Washington, D.C.: Pew Research Center, 2018), <https://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2018/04/25/the-changing-profile-of-unmarried-parents/>.

¹¹ Brenda A. Snailum, “How Families Shape the Faith of Younger Generations,” in *Teaching the Next Generations: A Comprehensive Guide for Teaching Christian Formation*, ed. Terrence D. Linhart (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2016), 177.

and the interrelationships of individual members are more complicated than the Church at times admits. This makes the task of religious education, faith formation, and catechesis a process which must navigate the complexities, but which has often been left unattended. This means that the task of the Church and families in educating all members is also a complex reality, but a reality that can be met with right understanding.

Many scholars have written that Christians are people of narrative. There can be no doubt that Christian communities are informed and sustained by the Word of God. For Catholic Christians, it is not enough to only read and reflect on the biblical narrative, but that narrative must be coupled with ongoing experience as understood in the family and community at large. It is through shared stories and the weaving together of new stories that the fabric of Christianity is sustained and strengthened. Too often, many stories are suppressed or not invited to be part of the larger whole, and the greater narrative suffers. Children may be overlooked, and their experiences undervalued as contributive to the story of faith.

Narrative is an innate human desire. Story is part of the fabric of one's being. Children listen to and internalize the stories they hear, and their identities are formed both in the telling and embodiment of those stories. "It is from stories that we receive our 'character,' and those stories in turn become part of our background, the horizons within which we constitute our world and engage in action."¹² Worship uses storytelling to link a community with its past, present, and future. Not only is the biblical narrative important, but also it is also valuable to recall how people of faith have interpreted and embodied that narrative. Worship is where stories are told so the Church may keep alive its memory while continually shaping an identity. Singaporean systematic theologian Simon Chan writes, "without anchoring itself within the living and

¹² James K. A. Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom: How Worship Works*, vol. 2, Cultural Liturgies (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), 129.

continuing tradition, the modern church will have no long-term collective memory, and therefore no self-identity, that will enable it to judge” the current moment in light of biblical truths.¹³ It is in and through worship that the story is told and where the story continues to unfold. Family catechetical education must then be a compliment to the worship practices by drawing themes from it and expanding on those themes in dialogue with participants and their experiences.

Thomas H. Groome has been a leading scholar in the field of Christian education since the 1980s. He is now a distinguished professor at Boston College. He defines Christian religious education as “a political activity with pilgrims in time that deliberately and intentionally attends with them to the activity of God in our present, to the Story of the Christian faith community, and to the Vision of God’s Kingdom, the seeds of which are already among us.”¹⁴ Carefully, Groome distinguishes between religious education and catechesis, but notes that the methods of catechesis, generally oral instruction, are those most used to provide religious education. It is from this understanding of catechesis then, that the Catholic Church has developed programs for religious education. This understanding, however, can miss part of what is included in Groome’s definition.

It is the telling of the stories of Christian faith that has emerged, and the method for doing so has been to place students in a classroom with a teacher, that is a catechist, who then tells the story. The immediate issue that arises is the telling of the story comes from the perspective and the context of the catechist, and it does not always reflect contemporary scholarship. There are still people who are taught Moses wrote the first five books of the Bible. However, biblical scholars have shown there were multiple others with varied oral traditions in which the earliest

¹³ Simon Chan, *Liturgical Theology: The Church as Worshipping Community* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2006), 31.

¹⁴ Thomas H. Groome, *Christian Religious Education: Sharing Our Story and Vision* (San Francisco: Harper and Row Publishers, 1980), 25. The definition is italicized in the book.

books of Scripture were recorded. This illustrates one reason why a classroom dominated by one educator may not always be the best technique for handing on the faith.

Another issue is that hearing and retelling the story is only part of what Groome, Chan, and Smith are getting at. The story has little meaning if it fails to impact the lives of hearers. Catechetical education is not simply learning the story, but also making the story one's own. The story transforms as those who are learning perform the story. Smith refers to this performance or practice as 'tuning'. Christian education tunes hearers who make the story their own to then rehearse the story in their own bodies. "We are conscripted into a Story through those practices that enact and perform and embody a Story about the good life."¹⁵ This begins in worship at Mass, but it must also become part of what happens in programs of catechetical education. Hearing and practicing the stories can lead to transformation, and if families are practicing together then the impact on Church and society is more powerful.

According to Groome, we inaugurate this transformation by recognizing and respecting the inherent dignity of all learners. All are learning together, and all are imprinted with the image of God. We should presume that when we acknowledge the spiritual nature of learners, then we delve into and teach souls meaning people's truest selves are engaged.¹⁶ This opens the way for authentic learning that can be coupled with practical application. The story of Christian faith, grounded in the Bible, is one that is both challenging and rewarding. Catechetical education must provide access to "the whole historical reality and spiritual wisdom of Christian revelation" with "the demands and promises that this faith makes upon the lives of its adherents and communities."¹⁷ Authentic catechetical education allows learners to share their experiences,

¹⁵ Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom*, 137.

¹⁶ Thomas H. Groome, *Will There Be Faith? A New Vision for Educating and Growing Disciples* (New York: Harper Collins, 2011), 67.

¹⁷ Groome, *Will There Be Faith*, 68.

to hear the experience of others, to acknowledge the themes of failure and redemption in our history and to know they are part of the whole. In other words, learning takes place in the context of the community in which one is becoming. One's self is transformed to be for others. Family catechetical education is a community that provides a path to personal and communal transformation.

Traditional methods used in catechetical education, argues Joyce Ann Mercer, isolate children and youth from the community's activities, be they social, service-oriented, or liturgical. We have, in a sense, created an adult church and a children's church. Sunday School and Religious Education classes have shifted the community of practice from the full church at worship to "a set of pedagogical relations." Once children were apprenticed and now they are relegated to being information receptacles.¹⁸ This two-tiered system has an impact which was not intended. Namely, parents and children are no longer sharing faith but living in two different faith experiences. This is further exacerbated by the fact that parents drop their children off for classes, but do not engage in further learning for themselves. Even though "many [parents] yearn to pass the faith on to their children, [they] lack the vocabulary, the support, and the resources to do so."¹⁹ The education of the children is nearly completely transferred from the parents to a largely volunteer staff. Marcia Bunge says pointedly that "many congregations offer weak religious education programs and fail to emphasize the importance of parents in faith development."²⁰ A program that is built on families participating together will transform

¹⁸ Joyce Ann Mercer, *Welcoming Children: A Practical Theology of Childhood* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2005), 190.

¹⁹ Mariette Martineau, Joan Weber, and Leif Kehrwald, *Intergenerational Faith Formation: All Ages Learning Together* (New London, CT: Twenty-Third Publications, 2008), 9.

²⁰ Marcia J. Bunge, "Historical Perspectives on Children in the Church: Resources for Spiritual Formation and a Theology of Childhood Today," in *Children's Spirituality: Christian Perspectives, Research and Applications*, ed. Donald Ratcliff (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2004), 43.

traditional methods and re-member the Body of Christ with children and adults participating together.

What Mercer proposes then, is a gradual participation of children in the various roles which constitute the Christian community. “For children in congregations, learning is a process of Christian identity formation that takes place through participation in the congregation as a community of practice, which gives shape to particular ways of making meaning.”²¹ Whether children serve in a liturgical capacity or help serve coffee and rolls on Sunday morning or they send cards to parishioners in the nursing home, they can be mentored in various ways. In any community of faith, just as there are multiple ways of teaching/learning, there is more than one way of being Church. Children are not always able to articulate these needs, but they do desire a sense of belonging and of trust. Adults must then be examples not simply of faith sharing as a narrative, but they must allow their lives to speak to the faith they profess.²² These adult examples may begin during worship at Sunday Mass, but as children observe adults, there can be more opportunities for faith-sharing. These faith-sharing opportunities are fostered in sessions of family catechetical education.

The Mass can be a great place to begin. It is the primary meeting place of the community and it is there that the stories of faith are told. “Children need symbols, actions and stories.”²³ The telling and retelling is done through the reading of Scripture, singing hymns of praise, processing to receive the body and blood of Christ, and in pledging once again to carry the message that is the Good News into the world and all we do. It is through this worship experience that members recall their shortcomings while at the same time professing hope in a

²¹ Mercer, *Welcoming Children*, 168.

²² Mercer, 173-75.

²³ Pope Francis, *Amoris Laetitia*, §288.

God who simply won't let go of the people whom God has called. This means that Sunday Mass, which is already embedded with symbol and sacrament, and which the Church says is the source and summit of the Christian life, must be an experience that engages all the faithful who are gathered. No one is a passive participant.²⁴ What then must be done to increase participation not simply for participation's sake, but to lead to authentic transformation?

Sunday Mass, indeed, worship itself, ought to be a sensory experience. Sensory engagement taps into and shapes the imaginative core of Christians. When women and men and children are exposed in worship to experiences of tasting, touching, smelling, seeing, and hearing the love of God poured out on them, they relive the stories that have called them to be who they are. When the narrative is simply heard or read and is not internalized it loses its affect to be transformative, and may, therefore, be ignored. The goal should be to embody the story.²⁵ The use of various elements to prod the senses reminds the worshipping community there is more to the story, and each member can, and ought, to make the story his or her own. The uses of various elements also honor and involves members of the community who may have deficiencies in any of their senses. This sensory engagement should occur during catechetical education, and doing so with families mirrors the liturgy.

Since Jesus communicates grace and always points to God the Creator, whom he calls Father (*Abba*, even), he is referred to as a sacramental sign. "Human encounter with Jesus is therefore the sacrament of the encounter with God."²⁶ Jesus is grace made visible. One may go further and state sacraments are revelation writ small. God is known more intimately as the

²⁴ "Sacrosanctum Concilium," accessed December 26, 2019, http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19631204_sacrosanctum-concilium_en.html. See especially paragraphs 10 and 14.

²⁵ Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom*, 137.

²⁶ Edward Schillebeeckx, *Christ The Sacrament of the Encounter with God*, trans. Paul Barrett and Mark Schoof (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1963), 15; See also Jn. 14:9.

Church participates in each sacrament. Baptism reveals God's desire to make each God's own and to blot out the stain of sin. Confirmation demonstrates the working of the Holy Spirit in each of the baptized. In the Eucharist, grace is profoundly shared in the meal of bread and wine. Christ is truly present because grace is present in all the faithful who participate. Reconciliation reveals God's love for us in the continual offering of God's self and the invitation to try again to be more like Christ. Becoming more like Christ means Christians become what they receive and in turn make visible God's grace. Christians become sacraments of Christ and allow others to encounter God's divinity in their humanity.²⁷

Understanding sacraments as revelatory, and that women and men become sacrament, Christians are enabled to love one another. We begin building relationships with family members and then our relationships with other Christians grow as we share communion. "Knowing God is impossible unless we enter into a life of love and communion with others."²⁸ God's grace is no longer only manifest through God's self-communication or self-disclosure in Jesus, but grace is mediated by those who have come to share in the fellowship of Christ. This mediation is brought about through the working of the Holy Spirit. The seed of the Spirit's gift, that is grace, is implanted in Christians at baptism. At baptism women and men or children claim their place in the history of revelation. It is a transcendent moment wherein the recipient of the sacrament is stamped with a new character that demonstrates God's claim on him or her. Henceforth, the journey of faith is an awakening to the presence of God in the life of the community and of the individual. This awakening is cultivated through family catechetical education with the help of the Holy Spirit.

²⁷ Schillebeeckx, *Christ the Sacrament*, 204.

²⁸ Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Quest for the Living God: Mapping Frontiers in the Theology of God* (New York: Continuum, 2007), 223.

The Holy Spirit serves as a guide throughout one's life. It is the Spirit who births new life, bringing people to experience God in new ways in and among other communities. Attuned to the prompting of the Spirit, Christians recognize the living presence of God wherever they may be, and with whomever they are in conversation. One's personal Christian history is essentially animated by the Holy Spirit so that believers may give witness by the testimony of their lives to the innerworkings of the Spirit. It is through this internal working of the Spirit that grace is manifest in individuals and in the community of faith. Grace is made visible when women and men enact, that is give life to, the values Jesus espouses in the gospel.

To truly make an impact, to provide space where sacramental encounters are transformative events, a more integrated approach to religious education is needed. In such an approach, experience of all participants must be considered and honored. Initiating an integrated program requires a starting point that meets each family wherever they are on their journey of faith. Such an approach includes variety. It is also an approach that honors the family as the building block of society and recognizes that it is within the context of family most of the formation, both that of faith and of society, occurs.²⁹

Attending to the complex realities of family life and honoring the role parents have in the education of their children, while seeking to integrate the Sunday Mass readings, I have endeavored to provide a family-based approach to catechetical education. Sometimes the approach proved to be more adult and other in other instances more elementary. St. Augustine has a diverse grouping of families. This diversity has been both a challenge and opportunity in designing a program. This process has been both rewarding and frustrating, but it has been well received by children and parents alike.

²⁹ Catholic Church, *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 2207.

Design and Its Evolution

Gathering Data to Begin

As a pilot program, the parish staff decided that family sessions would be held once per month during the religious education program calendar. This amounts to eight sessions total from September 15, 2019 through May 3, 2020. For the purpose and scope of this paper, only the first four sessions are described and evaluated. Each session held both similarities and differences with the others, which is noted in greater detail below. Sessions were generally well attended, and families spoke fondly of the opportunity to spend time together. Each session was insightful which led to ongoing adaptation during the four-month period.³⁰

Elementary religious education classes meet between Sunday morning Masses. Mass is celebrated at 7:30 a.m. and 10:00 a.m., and so religious education meets from 8:45 until 9:45 a.m. On days without family sessions, parents are invited to enjoy fellowship in the church basement where coffee and donuts are provided weekly. This same timeline was used for each of the family sessions, although there were often families who lingered after the sessions were finished. Since each family is busy, and some drive from more than a half hour away, one hour is likely the most time we can set aside for catechetical education. The 10:00 Mass has traditionally been the most well-attended service for families, especially those with elementary-age children, and we want to encourage families to attend Mass together.

I spoke at the close of each of the Masses on August 24 and 25, 2019, to communicate the launch of our pilot as well as to make known the changes to religious education and youth ministry. The message was reinforced at the parent meeting on September 4. At the parent

³⁰ The importance of being a reflexive practitioner and modifying one's research design is noted in Mary Clark Moschella, *Ethnography as a Pastoral Practice: An Introduction* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2008). Especially helpful is the chapter 3, "Research Design."

meeting we distributed registration forms, calendars for the first semester, volunteer forms, and a survey (see Appendix A) that asked a variety of questions regarding how families sustain and express their faith. A total of fifteen questions addressed Mass attendance, prayer at home, faith discussions, religious paraphernalia in the home, saints, and why they were enrolling their children in religious education and/or youth ministry. The survey was designed as a means for developing a more targeted approach to the family sessions for elementary youth.

While only twenty-five surveys were returned overall, only five surveys were returned by families with elementary-age children. However, the surveys did provide some insights into the areas of strength and challenge for families involved in religious education at all levels. For instance, most families responded “yes” to the question: “Do you discuss matters of faith with your family?” There was not a follow up to that question, but we can reasonably assume that families have some level of comfort discussing questions of faith. Many, but not all of those who responded yes to discussing faith also responded affirmatively to the question, “Do you perform acts of service with your family?” We might infer that families who are comfortable discussing faith also serve together. However, it made us consider if we as a parish and catechetical education program are providing families with the tools to reflect on their service and resources to deepen their conversations.

Another question that many respondents affirmed referred to praying with the family. Overwhelmingly, people prayed together as a family before meals. The natural follow up to that would be to ask how often families eat together. Even still, knowing that families are eating and praying together means they are attending to a spiritual practice which they are invited to participate as part of the Church’s tradition. Theological reflection on eating and praying

together coupled with their understanding of the Eucharist would lead to further insights with families.

Four Family Sessions³¹

Session One: Lazarus and the Rich Man

The first session on September 29 was attended by fourteen families. This session utilized the passage from Luke about Lazarus and the Rich Man. The goal of the session was to examine equity along with the concept of freedom. After an opening prayer, we passed out a photo of a boy panged with hunger. We asked the adults and children to look at the picture and talk to each other about what they saw. Another photo was given to each family which depicted hands reaching up at a barbed-wire fence. A final photo showed a sunrise or sunset with an open bird cage in the foreground from which two birds had apparently flown. Participants were asked to discuss what they saw and how the pictures made them feel.

These photos led to a large group discussion on freedom and captivity and wealth and disparity. We overheard people talking about refugees, immigrants, and the desire for better lives. Children asked why it is that some have while others do not. We did not try to answer those questions, but rather let them be, to percolate in the minds and hearts of those gathered. Then it was immediately on to the next activity. We passed out poster-size pieces of paper to each family. Along with the paper we gave each of them crayons or colored pencils. We did not give out equal numbers or even a variety of colors to each family. They were all given the same task of drawing a picture from nature, and that was the only parameter. Some families had much to choose from, while others struggled to create a picture. Now that the group had an experience

³¹ See Appendix B for a detailed outline of each of the family sessions.

of wealth and inequality, they were willing to say even more about those topics. It was time to read the Gospel.

We passed out copies of the Gospel for each family to read together. They were given to the families with a Spanish translation on one side and an English translation on the other. It was incredibly important for us that the families be able to read in their primary language. Moreover, this allowed all the members to recognize the diversity within the group, and hopefully move all toward a greater appreciation of the other. After the families had time to read together and initially speak about what they read, we had a brief large-group discussion. There was much to say, and people were familiar with the story of the Rich Man and Lazarus. The first session was nearly over. We closed by praying together the responsorial psalm for the day, Psalm 146. We dismissed and invited everyone to the next session.

Session Two: The Widow and the Judge

Session two took place on October 20, and activities were based on Luke 18:1-8 where Jesus tells the parable of the widow and the relenting judge. The goal for this session was two-fold. First, we wanted to highlight the theme of perseverance, which is represented by the widow who continues to plead her case until the judge gives in. The second goal of the session was to help families gain or regain a connection to the Rosary and its prayers. As Catholics, it is important that catechetical education incorporate both Scripture and Tradition. We also had in mind one of our program goals which is helping families to pray together. An old tradition of the Church is that families pray the Rosary together. The prayers are meditative and simple, and are used regularly in liturgy, especial the Lord's Prayer. The month of October has long been dedicated to the Rosary because of the Memorial of Our Lady of the Rosary on October 7.³²

³² The memorial was previously called Our Lady of Victory because it was instituted by Pope Pius V after the Battle of Lepanto, which successfully kept the Ottomans from invading Italy and other parts of Western Europe.

After September's session, we decided to make some minor changes. First, the volunteer assistant was given an agenda and I simply signaled when it was time to hand out materials. We had sat in the cafeteria tables that are used by our parochial school students at the first session. We elected to place different tables in the space so families would be more comfortable, and so they could be separated from other families for more intimate discussions. When families arrived, they encountered several sets of rosary beads at their tables. We went from a stark space, to using simple elements to both decorate and encourage discussion around the themes of the day.

After a brief opening prayer invoking the Holy Spirit to lead and guide the session, families were given the opportunity to choose two or three children's books to read. These books had been carefully chosen because they spoke to the topic of perseverance. Children and parents took turns reading the stories to each other. They were instructed to simply read, and they could talk about the stories, but we wanted to give each of them ample time for reading. After reading we asked each family to share something about one of the stories they read. Some stories proved to be enlightening, and many stories had not been read previously by the participants. It was, for many, an unusual exercise for religious education, but one they appreciated. Following the brief whole group feedback, we moved to look at the Gospel.

Whereas in the first session we asked questions after giving time for families to read together, in this second session we included the questions at the bottom of the page. Again, the Gospel was presented in both English and Spanish. Before a brief discussion of the questions with the large group, we also included a coloring page depicting the relenting judge with the widow pleading her case. This coupled with the story of the Israelites battling the Amalekites (the first reading for October 20), showed perseverance when facing adversity. Families were

sharing with one another times when they decided to persevere and how it made their lives better in the end.

Session Three: Be Not Deceived; Be Prepared

We held our third session on November 17. The focus from the gospels was taken from Luke 21:5-19. Jesus speaks to the disciples in this passage about end times. He urges the disciples to be guarded, to not be deceived, and to prepare for whatever comes their way. This was a shortened session because the elementary students oversaw various ministries at the 10:00 a.m. Mass that day. These included the roles of greeters, lectors, gift bearers, and altar servers., which was another way of fulfilling one of our program goals of involving youth more in the Mass. I felt very strongly that the children should take on as many roles as possible. We began our time together, after an opening prayer, with several rounds of the game, Simon Says. One person acts as the leader (Simon) and all the other children must do as Simon says. However, sometimes Simon doesn't say, "Simon says," and he or she deceives the followers. It requires careful listening. Children took terms being Simon, and many of them were very creative. Following the game, we talked about the importance of listening carefully to leaders so that we are not led astray. It was the same warning Jesus had given to the disciples in that Sunday's Gospel.

We passed out copies of the Gospel with some discussion questions at the bottom of the page. We asked families to talk to each other about the discussion questions. However, we also encouraged the parents to share stories from their families of being steadfast in their faith. Each of the families spent time sharing and we had to call the group to order. We closed the whole group time with some sharing of stories that were prompted by the Gospel reading. After brief announcements and a closing prayer, we headed to the church to get ready for Mass. Some of

the children had never had an official role at Mass before and there was some anxiety. After practice everyone settled down, and the parishioners were thrilled with the children's participation.

Session Four: Gaudete! He is the One

The final session for discussion and evaluation occurred on December 15. This Third Sunday of Advent reading was taken from Matthew 11:2-11 where John the Baptist, who is in prison, sends his followers to inquire whether Jesus is the one they've been expecting or if they should look for another. Jesus' response is neither an affirmation nor a denial. Instead, he invites John's followers to judge for themselves what Jesus has accomplished to determine if he is the One. In addition to the gospel passage, we used Isaiah 35:1-6, 10. The reading speaks about what is and what will be in surprising and paradoxical metaphors. God will restore divine blessing upon the world in God's time. Through these two readings, we wanted to draw out the theme of rejoicing and the themes of expectation and patience.

After we prayed an opening prayer asking God to help us prepare for Jesus' coming at Christmas, to be patient in Advent, we acknowledged a number of children who had recently made their First Reconciliation at the parish penance service. It is the second rite they must complete before First Eucharist (the first is Baptism). They shared that it was not scary, and they joked that they had been nervous at all. According to this group of children the pastor was easy to talk to and was even a little humorous. Some even wondered aloud when the next confession would be.

We asked for volunteers for the next activity. Six children volunteered and were given parts to play in a short skit. Some of the children were elementary-aged and others were middle school siblings. The skit introduced the wild character of John the Baptist. He was of course the

subject of the Gospels two weeks in a row, and his character deserved attention during the family session. John plays a special role in announcing and ushering in Jesus' ministry. His story teaches of hope, patience, and faith in God who keeps promises. We shifted quickly from a brief look at John the Baptist to what became our main activity.

This week there was a greater focus on the Old Testament reading from the prophet Isaiah. Copies of the reading were passed out and families were asked to simply read the passage. Next, they were asked to read and discuss what pictures arose in their minds as they were reading. Each family was then given a large piece of butcher paper and crayons or colored pencils. They were also given construction paper, scissors, and glue. The final item was an envelope full of pictures that we thought spoke to the imagery evoked in Isaiah. Images included dancers, a hearing ear, a choir, flowers, dry land, and more. The instructions were to illustrate the reading, to use whatever pictures they had, to create their own illustrations, and to use words that would be helpful to make sense of their creations.

After nearly half an hour, many families were still engaged and working on their "story boards." Each family stood and presented their creations. We took pictures of each of them as well. The pictures show the pride and delight of the children and their families. One of the most pleasing aspects is that some of the pictures were vertically presented and others horizontally. We have creative folks among us. We had little time to talk about the Gospel, but we handed it out and gave them a word search to accompany it. We were able to walk around and talk to families as they were creating, discussing, and helping one another. There were some announcements, and we had a short evaluation form we wanted everyone to complete. This session helped families be empowered in the creativity and faith sharing as they worked together.

Evaluations and other materials were collected, and the session ended by praying together the Lord's Prayer.

Evaluation

What I found in the process of piloting the family catechesis program is that if participants know from the beginning that what is being done is experimental and yet fundamental, they are receptive and willing to enter the process with some uncertainty. The assessment, which is ongoing, comes mainly from anecdotal notes, careful listening, and an openness to play. To take what is written in the Gospel or other readings for Sundays and create an experience wherein families are more in touch with their faith and are growing not only in knowledge but also in love, is an immense challenge. As noted in the previous section on design of the project, we were adjusting along the way as we received feedback whether in body language, mood, or what was spoken to us. We were greatly aided by the fact that the assisting catechist is also a trained and licensed counselor who has keen insights with group dynamics. The insights of this shared experiment of faith are shared here along with some thoughts about what might be done going forward.

One of the most difficult and sad occurrences was when children showed up to the sessions without any other family members. Initially, I thought I must have poorly communicated our intentions with the program. However, even after face-to-face communication and repeated emails and notes home, there was still one child whose family never came, though he faithfully participated nearly every Sunday. On the last family day, another catechist and our counselor-assistant managed to catch the father at pick up and had a heartening conversation. He very well may have misplaced his schedule, but other reminders

were sent, and the days were always listed in the church bulletin. I later found that family rarely attends Mass and would therefore be less informed about many events happening in the parish. We will invite the family to join us for Mass following our next family sessions, and I am hopeful they will be receptive.

The issue of communication is an ongoing challenge. The parish could do more in the area of communication to reach a younger audience. Many people read the bulletin on Sunday, but many also leave copies in their pews neglecting information for later in the week. The company that runs the bulletin also provides an app called myParish. In youth ministry and in middle school religious education we use the Remind 101 app to alert students and parents of upcoming opportunities, cancelations due to weather, or any other announcements. That has been helpful to parents as they are familiar with that app because the schools also use it, and many teachers also use it to help students stay organized with their assignments.

The principle communication issue that this project addresses is that of families sharing faith with one another. Families can grow in their faith when they read and pray together and when they are given opportunities to do so. The feedback we received from our surveys indicated that families are comfortable talking about issues of faith within their families. However, we also found that in the written evaluation from December 15 that families were overwhelmingly pleased with the chance to be grouped together and to talk to and to teach one another. What we have done in some small way is to help families recognize they have their own narratives that can be woven into the larger story. My hope is that many will be open to share their experiences with a larger audience.

Over the course of four months we realized the need to provide clear and simple direction to the families during the lessons. One reason this is so important is because some of the parents

speak very little English, and beyond speaking is the frustration of thinking in English imperatives. It also places an undue burden on the children tasked with translating for parents. My own command of Spanish is lacking. Happily, one of our regular Sunday catechists is bilingual and of Mexican heritage. She volunteered to sit near to those families with the least proficiency in English. After receiving some written feedback in Spanish, I have come to learn that many of our Spanish-speaking adults are also undereducated in their native language. This is a further indication that simple, clear directions are very important.

The cultural dynamics at St. Augustine are seemingly in flux. The number of Hispanic families is growing in this area of the United States, and the Church must be responsive to the unique needs, gifts, and heritage this brings. According to the broader definition used by the U.S. Catholic Bishops, the parish could be referred to as a ‘shared parish.’³³ However, there aren’t distinct ministries or even a Mass in Spanish that would cause the parish to be defined more narrowly as Brett Hoover does in his ethnographic study. Hoover defines the shared parish as “parishes with two or more cultural groups, each with distinct masses and ministries, but who share the same parish facilities.”³⁴ What he describes are two very different communities sharing space and struggling to be one. Unfortunately, at St. Augustine there are few people who are even talking about creating unique experiences or pastoral outreach to Hispanic families.³⁵

³³ “USCCB Launches Multicultural Parish Resource, Best Practices for ‘Shared Parishes,’” accessed February 14, 2020, <http://www.usccb.org/news/2014/14-051.cfm>.

³⁴ Brett C. Hoover, *The Shared Parish: Latinos, Anglos, and the Future of the U.S. Catholicism* (New York: New York University Press, 2014), 2.

³⁵ Hosffman Ospino, “Ten Reality Checks About Young Hispanics in Catholic Schools and Colleges,” in *Our Catholic Children: Ministry with Hispanic Youth and Young Adults*, ed. Hosffman Ospino (Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor, 2018). Ospino shares his observations regarding biases and the need for pastoral outreach to engage and involve Hispanic families and youth. What he notes is endemic in the U.S. and specifically in the Catholic Church, and a parish like St. Augustine is not unique in this regard.

There is an overarching ‘habitus’ within the parish that keeps most people doing what they do without much reflection or thought about trying something new.³⁶

Family catechetical education, then, stands out as a way forward; it is a base from which St. Augustine may further build programming that unites English and Spanish-speaking parishioners. Whereas we have endeavored to have bilingual written material during family sessions, rarely is Spanish used in the church bulletin. Only infrequently are major announcements given in both Spanish and English. The pastor did send a letter, which was translated into Spanish for self-identified Hispanic families, to each registered household last summer thoroughly describing the parish’s financial position. While it was a noble gesture, the letter was not sent bilingually. It also missed any regular attendees who are not registered. Further conversation needs to happen around registration in Catholic parishes, but that falls outside the scope of this project.

Not only are the directions given or the questions asked important, but the activities need to have a broad appeal that engage families in a variety of ways. These four sessions used both images and words, but also invited creativity with posters, pictures, and coloring. The two activities that were most appreciated were reading story books together and creating a poster to illustrate the passage from the book of Isaiah. Both activities got families talking, sharing, being creative, and caused them to think about their own lives of faith without any other prompting aside from the directions to complete the activity. The activities were simple, but they transcended language and culture. They brought families together for a common purpose and they learned something about the faith we profess through the process.

³⁶ Moschella, *Ethnography as a Pastoral Practice*, 52-55.

One regret is that we did not do a good job of just letting families get to know one another. The focus early on was on the project itself and not as much on the people involved in the project. That was noted by more than one parent at the fourth session. Some of the families know one another, but others do not, and that has caused a disconnect in what we are trying to accomplish. It is clear to me now that sustaining the family sessions will require families who support one another, but it is tough to support those we do not know. This will absolutely be addressed in the second half of the program year.

Conclusion

We experimented with family catechetical education on Sunday mornings. We strove to keep in mind the assertion of Pope Francis that “parents always influence the moral development of their children, for better or for worse. It follows that they should take up this essential role and carry it out consciously, enthusiastically, reasonably and appropriately.”³⁷ The initial result has been the response of families showing up to be formed in common. The intermediate activity is the reading of and reflecting together on the gospel, along with cognate activities such as the use of photos, children’s stories, and coloring pages. We have also spent time introducing or reintroducing the common prayers of the church e.g. the Our Father, Glory Be, and Apostles’ Creed. The reaction has been very positive. The room is abuzz while families share together, and the large group sharing indicates there is a growing comfort among those present. We will do a better job of helping those present get to know one another so that we can deepen the level of comfort that exists among participants. A time of fellowship with food and icebreakers is

³⁷ Pope Francis, *Amoris Laetitia*, §259.

being planned. Our hope is that as families get to know one another better they will be more inclined to participate, to share and to realize that faith is a journey that requires a community.

The process of creating something new is a challenge in any setting, but even more so in a small, rural parish. People are reluctant to change even if there is solid evidence supporting the change. There is no doubt in my mind that people want the best for the parish, for families, and for children. This is clear from the ongoing support that is given in both finances and other resources to St. Augustine School. I am encouraged by the response of families and their willingness to enter this project. There are now other parishes within the diocese that are doing experiments with intergenerational catechesis in various forms. Keeping in mind context is very important; what will work in an urban parish like St. Lawrence in Lafayette versus what is done in rural Indiana may be very different. Hopefully the common goal of providing a richer experience of catechetical education is the guiding factor wherever experiments are taking place.

The prevailing method for delivering catechetical education is no longer viable. A strong, transformative program must be built around families. Parishes have, in fact, always been built around families. If the laity are going to be the leaven which they are called to be in the world, then catechetical education must be the incubator for nurturing a Christ-reflecting life.³⁸ Not only are the stories of the Church important, but the experiences of women, men, and children are vital, and must be woven into the great narrative of Christianity. We begin to know and usher in the reign of God when we become more like Christ. This happens within the context of the family—our first community. Jesus proclaimed the kingdom was at hand—visibly present in the disciples gathered to be formed, to create a new community transcending the

³⁸ Vatican Council II, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium*, (21 November 1964) §31, at The Holy See. http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html.

traditional notion of families (Matt. 4:17). Jesus further says that the kingdom was within those who were gathered (Luke 17:21). Even those who are unsure or new to the faith carry the seeds of God's promised reign. These seeds are tended to become seedlings and then mature plants through family catechetical education.

Worship and sacraments are deeply formative for Catholics. We understand the world to be infused with grace, that holiness and blessing encapsulate all we do and all we encounter. Worship, most usually in the form of Sunday Mass, is the rich soil that gives life to the seeds and stimulates growth. Family catechetical education then provides essential nutrients which foster healthy growth. One of our hopes was to encourage greater participation in Mass by preparing hearts and minds with activities focused on gospel themes. We were constantly pointing back to Jesus and his teachings. We asked how we might authentically apply those teachings to our own lives.

One anecdote expresses well both the hope I have had in this process and the future hope that continues to develop. On November 17, at the third session, the theme that emerged from the gospel was perseverance. In October the theme had been persistence. There was a real sense in November our task as Christians is to be discerning with whatever may happen in our lives. We are to be vigilant in the face of peril and evil, but we cannot be complacent or lock ourselves away in fear. I invited families share stories of perseverance, how they overcame deception, and how their ability to continue has shaped their family. One mother felt compelled to share with the whole group. She shared the struggle of emigrating from Mexico and finding a foothold in rural Indiana. She spoke of how she prayed unceasingly and finding the strength through her faith to never give up. She is now doing quite well, and her career and her family are successful.

Her story put an “Amen!” on the end of that session, and we were all left thinking more about our own stories.

Our family sessions gave space for people to grow in their expression of faith. Our family sessions were accessible to all; human dignity was respected as all voices were encouraged and heard. Whereas in a classroom the loudest voice is heard or the most talkative are recognized, family catechetical education used the language of ‘we’ and ‘us’ over ‘I’ and ‘me’ because families shared from a collective and not an individual perspective. This emergence of a collective voice was the best surprise for me, and possibly the best outcome of this experimentation. People let go of self, at least for those four hours, to allow something new to be born. How beautiful the voices that lift up one another. I am convinced family catechetical education, through continued experimentation, will continue at St. Augustine.

Just as each spring new crops are planted and each autumn crops are harvested, catechetical education has its own seasons. Its shape will likely evolve as all grow, mature, and respond to needs that arise. I know I will not see the full impact of this undertaking, but I remain hopeful it will make a difference. The seeds have been planted and we are nurturing their growth through this process. The prayers are still being offered, the questions are still being asked, and people are being formed to lead lives that give witness to the gospel. May these efforts come to fruition and provide a new framework for how the parish educates and forms its members. Experimentation is ongoing, and only when we fail to try something will the parish be less than it is now. Each day is a new moment to live and to share our faith. I hope the people of St. Augustine will continue to share faith, build community, and cultivate domestic churches.

Appendix A

Catechetical Survey

Respond to the following questions to the best of your understanding.

Please know that your responses to the following questions will be used to enhance our religious education programs at St. Augustine Catholic Church. The results will be shared anonymously with staff and with Doctor of Ministry program participants at Emory University. **Should you choose to share your name, it will be kept confidential.** We do not judge; we seek to form better disciples of Christ.

If you have any questions, please contact **Mr. Anthony Butler, Director of Religious Education**, at renselaerdre@gmail.com or 219-866-5351.

Name (optional): _____ Date: _____

1. Which identity or identities best describe you? Circle all that apply.

Parent Catechist Grandparent Other: _____

2. What is your religious affiliation? (circle one)

Roman Catholic Protestant Jewish Muslim Other None

3. **When** did you last attend a Catholic Mass? If possible, please give a day and date.

4. **Where** did you last attend Catholic Mass?

5. **With whom** did you attend Catholic Mass then?

6. With whom do you normally attend Catholic Mass?

7. When and why do you pray? _____

8. Do you pray with your family? YES NO

a) **If yes**, when do you typically pray? _____

b) **If yes**, in what way(s) do you typically pray? _____

c) **If no**, why not? _____

9. Do you discuss matters of faith with your family? YES NO

10. Do you perform acts of service with your family? YES NO

a) **If yes**, what acts of service do you participate in as a family? Individually?

11. Does anyone in your household read the Bible? How often?

12. What religious symbols or figures can be found in your home?

13. Are there saints you feel close to? If so, which saints, and why?

14. Why have you chosen to enroll your children in religious education?

15. How might the parish better serve your family?

16. Would you be willing to have a follow-up conversation with Mr. Butler? If so, please include your name, phone number, and email address below:

Name

Phone Number

Email

Appendix B

Outline of Family Sessions

Family Session One, September 29, 2019

Readings at Mass: Amos 6:1, 4-7; Psalm 146; I Timothy 6:11-16; Luke 16:19-31

Opening Prayer

Photo Activity

The pictures below were distributed to families one at a time and they were asked to discuss what they saw in each. Then they were invited to share how the images made them feel.



Abundance and Scarcity Drawings

Families were invited to draw a scene from nature. Some were given lots of colored pencils and/or crayons while others received one or two colors. This was used to show the disparity that exists between rich and poor and the inequity experienced in the story of the Rich Man and Lazarus.

Reading and Discussion of Gospel

A copy of the Gospel reading was given to each family. One side of the page contained the gospel in English and the other side in Spanish. After the families had time to read the gospel in their primary language, we conducted a large group discussion with questions about what was read. The families had been prepped by the previous activities, and their familiarity with the story of the Rich Man and Lazarus helped keep the discussion going. Families were great at helping translate the questions we asked.

Praying Psalm 146

We closed the session with antiphonally praying Psalm 146 with the refrain: "Praise the Lord, my soul." Then we dismissed and many people headed to Mass.

Family Session Two, October 20, 2019

Readings at Mass: Exodus 17:8-13; Psalm 121; 2 Timothy 3:14-4:2; Luke 18:1-8

Opening Prayer**Let's Read Stories**

A selection of children's books were provided. Families were invited to read two or three stories together. The stories were discussed as a whole group. Each of the stories centered around the topic of persistence, which was a major topic drawn from the readings for this Sunday.

Reading and Discussion of Gospel

This week, copies of the Gospel were distributed with the discussion questions included at the bottom of the page. This allowed the families to talk about the reading together before there was a large group discussion. If some of the groups finished early, we also provided a word search to keep their minds on the Gospel.

Rosary Reminder

The Catholic Church keeps October as the Month of the Rosary. This is because the Rosary is especially celebrated with its own feast on October 7—the Memorial of Our Lady of the Rosary.

Family Session Three, November 17, 2019

Readings at Mass: Malachi 3:19-20; Psalm 98; II Thessalonians 3:7-12; Luke 21:5-19

Opening Prayer**Simon Says**

Children and adults played a few rounds of the game, Simon Says, to illustrate the concept of paying attention, being alert, and being careful not to be deceived. Children took turns playing the role of Simon.

Gospel with Questions

We handed out copies of the Gospel with discussion prompts at the bottom of the page. We asked families to focus in particular on a time when they struggled, but through their perseverance they found their faith strengthened. We asked them to talk about what helped them overcome their challenges. Some parents shared some stories that were unfamiliar to their children.

Wrap up

We closed the formal session a little early with some announcements and then went to church to practice the parts the children undertook at the 10:00 a.m. Mass. All the children sat together in church.

Family Session Four December 15, 2019

Readings at Mass: Isaiah 35:1-6, 10; Psalm 146; James 5:7-10; Matthew 11:2-11

Opening Prayer

First Reconciliation Acknowledgment

On Wednesday, December 11, seven of the children in religious education celebrated their first reconciliation during the parish's Advent penance service. We invited each of the students to stand and be recognized. A few of them shared their experience and noted it was less scary than they thought it would be. They witnessed to both the younger children and those who have long since completed their initiatory sacraments.

John the Baptist Presentation

Six volunteers, both elementary students and a couple middle school siblings, helped to present a short skit. The skit briefly introduced the character of John the Baptist.

Isaiah Reading Activity

The pictures below were used in the creation of a poster/collage/story board which gave a visual representation to the passage from Isaiah 35. Families were given copies of the pictures along with a piece of butcher paper, some glue, crayons/colored pencils, and scissors. They could use any of the provided images, write any words, and they had the freedom to design their own drawings. The passage in Isaiah is full of imagery, and the hope was that families would pick up on those images to "retell" the story in their own fashion.





Gospel Word Search

Though little time was left after the Isaiah Reading Activity, we still wanted to be sure everyone had some time to read the Gospel. After they finished reading the gospel and reflecting on the questions, they were given a word search with key words taken from the reading.

Evaluation and Announcement

We closed the session with some announcements. We wanted to be sure everyone knew there would be no religious education meetings for the following two weeks to allow for people who might be traveling or hosting during the holidays. Also, it has been our policy not to meet whenever school is not in session. Our attendance drops dramatically anyway. Lastly, we handed out an evaluation form to gain feedback on the first half of the year. We then dismissed and wished all a blessed holiday and looked forward to the new year.

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