

*The Complete
Guide to Becoming
a CREATIVE
CATECHIST*

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INTRODUCTION

The original edition and 1991 revision of *Creative Catechist* have proven helpful to thousands of catechists and Catholic school teachers. I am happy to be able to make it even more helpful in this new, abbreviated edition. The book that Carl and I wrote so many years ago continues to be a statement of our most basic catechetical creed. We believe that:

- catechesis is a very creative activity;
- catechists are creative people who want to become more creative;
- being a good catechist is one of the most creative, exciting, rewarding—as well as challenging—experiences anyone can have; and
- we believe in you, the catechist, as an essential element in communicating the faith.

These beliefs are the result of decades of teaching children, teenagers, and adults, as well as working with catechists. During that time, we discovered that creativity is not some rare, esoteric gift enjoyed by a few people, like poets, musicians, actors, sculptors, and dancers. Rather, it is something that comes with being alive, sensitive, caring, questioning, open to the Holy Spirit, willing to learn from the past and to explore the present. To be creative is to be willing to grow and to encourage growth in others. And “growing in faith” is what catechesis is all about.

Creativity is rooted in basic principles and expresses itself in a variety of practical ways. So, *Creative Catechist* is a blending of sound catechetical

principles and a wide variety of practical catechetical skills and activities. The principles, skills, and activities are drawn from over twenty centuries of catechetical experience in the church. This new edition of the book draws together ideas, activities, and exercises that help you, the catechist, present the content of catechesis in creative ways. I am grateful to Sister Janet Schaeffler, OP, for her help in choosing those that are most adaptable for the ever-changing nature of catechesis in these times.

Carl and I originally wrote *Creative Catechist* to help catechists tap into their own creativity and that of those they teach. We hoped it would help catechists grow in faith and increase those skills that will lead others to grow in faith as well. That hope remains as this revision is made available to a new group of catechists. While Carl is no longer with us, I

know he would be grateful to see his work and mine carried forward. May you, dear catechist, discover in yourself more of the creativity already there and let it blossom so that the important ministry of catechesis continues to flourish.

KEYS TO CREATIVE CATECHESIS

When I hear, I forget.

When I see, I remember.

When I do, I learn.

« CHINESE PROVERB »

We remember:

20% of what we HEAR

30% of what we SEE

50% of what we SEE

AND HEAR

70% of what we SAY

90% of what we DO

Janaan Manternach

Being Creative

At one of our workshops, a catechist told us a sad story about a boy who was very creative—until he went to school. There he learned to conform and, ultimately, his creativity was crushed. Before he went to school, the author says,

He always wanted to say things. He always wanted to explain things. So he drew. Sometimes he would just draw and it wasn't anything. He wanted to carve it in stone or write it in the sky. He would lie out on the grass and look up in the sky and it would be only him and the sky and the things inside that needed saying.

When he started school, he sat in a square brown desk like all the other square brown desks. It was tight and close. And stiff.

One day they drew. And he drew all yellow and it was the way he felt about morning. And it was beautiful.

The catechist came and smiled at him. "What's this?" she said. "Why don't you draw something like Ken's drawing? Isn't that beautiful?"

After that he always drew airplanes and rocket ships like everyone else. And he threw the old picture away. And when he lay outside looking at the sky, it was big and blue and all of everything, but he wasn't anymore.

He was square inside and brown, and his hands were stiff, and he was like anyone else. And the thing inside him that needed saying didn't need saying anymore. It had stopped pushing. It was crushed. Stiff. Like everything else.

The author of this sad story is unknown, but the crushing of that child's creativity remains a stimulus to us to want to grow as catechists, more and more able to give life to unsuspected, untapped creative powers. If it is important for teachers of other subjects to foster creativity, it is even more vital for catechists to do so. We believe that we share the creative power of the Spirit of the risen Lord who is with us to make all things new (Revelation 21:5). One of the best things that is happening in catechetics today is that we have rediscovered how traditionally Catholic it is to be creative in our catechetical ministry.

“But I’m Not Creative”

The initial reaction of many catechists is to profess a lack of creativity. In Bill Moyers' PBS series on creativity, his conclusion is reassuring. “Not for a minute am I suggesting that you be the next Picasso, Bach, Shakespeare, or Einstein (although I am willing to be surprised). But after completing a television series about creativity in America, I am convinced that each of us is innately creative and, with effort and discipline, can open that private reservoir of creativity to improve our daily lives.”

Creativity Discovered

Many years ago, a catechist accepted a teaching position in Chicago in a depressed part of the city. The walls of her meeting space, which had not been painted for years, were black with soot and dust. At first, she wasn't aware of the walls, so preoccupied was she with the forty-five fourth and fifth graders in her session. It didn't take long to build a relationship with the children, and she remembered thinking to herself, “This is going to be a good year.”

But everything inside her started going downhill after that one happy thought. She found herself gradually hating to go into the room, and she would leave it as soon after school as she could. Something was affecting her negatively, but she was not consciously in touch with what it was.

To cheer herself up, one morning she arranged a bouquet of fall flowers and sat the vase on her desk. During that day, her eyes traveled to the flowers often and she found herself feeling a bit more lighthearted. While

conducting a reading session with the fifth graders, she noticed some of the fourth graders not working but absorbed in her vase of flowers. She quickly put an end to their “beauty gathering” by telling them to “get back to work.”

That evening she wondered why she felt better but dismissed the possibility that the flowers had done it. The flowers died, as flowers will, and she missed them. To her surprise, the children missed them, too. This became evident one morning when a few of them were chatting together before the first bell. One of the boys said, almost angrily, “This place needs flowers. It’s so ugly in here.” The moment he said it, something that was the beginning and continuing of a creative time exploded within the catechist. She announced with unrestrained joy, “You’re right, Zachary! You’re absolutely right!”

The room was incredibly dingy and depressing, and she knew instantly that she needed to do something about it.

One of the first things she looked into was painting the walls. She was told that painting could not be done. Another idea came: “Rearrange the desks so the children will be facing each other rather than looking at the walls.” This was a gracious beginning.

In art session that week, the children painted still lifes of a bowl of fruit or a vase of flowers. They framed them with construction paper and tacked them on a strip of bulletin board that ran above the blackboards covering two walls of the room. The paintings made an exciting difference. A friend of the catechist made a huge banner. It was hung from the ceiling to the floor in the darkest corner of the room. Splashed across its cream-colored cloth were the words “God said, ‘Let there be light’ and the whole world became bright.”

Each new thing they did awakened them to another creative possibility. The catechist continually experienced the power of creativity—as a burst or shoot from something creative that she’d started to do.

Gradually, she and her learners kept transforming that room into a place that the children and the catechist loved being in. What took place in that room began to catch on throughout the whole school. The final part of the story is that the principal decided at the end of the year to have all the rooms painted!

Creativity Is Personal

We've reflected on this experience often because the teacher was one of us. What happened was not the result of a huge creative gift or an exceeding amount of talent in those 10- and 11-year-olds.

What happened was very personal. The teacher's spirit was hungering for something that was lacking. Her psyche and emotions, demanding something that was absent, were pushing at her sensibilities and disturbing them. Her depression was arising from an awareness that she had a gift to do something to make the place more beautiful, more human. It was a time when she, because of who she was, had to make beautiful what was environmentally ugly to unleash not only the creative power in herself but the powers that were in the children and in the place itself.

One of the most mysterious things in the creative process is this: once we give ourselves over to it, everything around us begins to contribute to what is happening. And from all that power, the creative thing takes on its own personality and begins to dictate the direction it will and should go. As soon as we feel that, we know we've got it—and it's wonderful.

Creativity Draws Out

We learned from that experience not only that creativity is personal, but also that the power to be creative rests in a capacity to sense—to have an idea—that something can be done to a place, to a thing, or with persons to make it or them more beautiful.

Jesus did this over and over again. Think of him with the blind man who pleaded that he wanted to see; with Zacchaeus, whose faith drove him up a tree; with the leper whose faith made him courageous enough to flout serious social taboos and approach Jesus.

Remember the child Zachary who said, "This place needs flowers. It's so ugly in here." The remarkable and creative thing about that moment is not only that Zachary sensed what was needed and voiced it to his teacher but that she heard what he was feeling. The creativity that each of us possesses is often given a boost by another who is graciously affected by one stroke of our brush and tells us that he or she needs more of what we can do.

This is a significant moment for the “creator.” He or she has to make a choice to accept the challenge to continue creating or to ignore and deny it.

Creativity Is Chosen

Very few people are actually creative: they don’t trust the power in themselves or they don’t trust the wisdom of another who suggests that they are creative.

Likewise, many people are non-creative because they have stopped listening to their own needs, stopped discovering what is genuinely satisfying in the world around them, stopped really listening to others, so busy are they with the struggle to be heard and to survive. The power, process, and experience of creativity is personal—a response to a need that everyone individually feels. Great painters, musicians, poets, writers, and dancers—and great catechists—are compelled by the need to forge, to shape, to make, and to express.

Creativity often happens out of a tension, a pull from without against a pull from within. Everybody experiences this because everyone possesses a secret that is uniquely beautiful and special.

Creativity Is for Others

We have an essential understanding of creativity when we consciously and purposely create not only to satisfy a need in ourselves—for our own joy—but also for the joy and well-being of others. Leonard Bernstein, the musical composer, said, “I would like to be remembered as someone who made music for his fellow human beings. Not just as someone who made music, not how well or badly, but that I made music for my fellow human beings.”

We have come to agree with Bill Moyers’ conviction that people are more creative than they imagine. If that is true, we as catechists need to continually foster our own creative potential. As we trust our own creativity more, as we dare to risk a bit, experiment a bit, grow a bit, we can become more creative in drawing out the creativity of our learners. Our success in fostering creativity is a matter both of attitude and of constructing learning activities that are genuinely creative.