With the decision to celebrate an Extraordinary Jubilee Year of Mercy, we receive a glimpse of something that is of paramount importance to our Holy Father – the unending mercy of God. And within the midst of this Year of Mercy, Pope Francis has named other jubilees to be celebrated. One that resonated with me in a particular way is the one celebrated on September 25th: the Jubilee of Catechists.

“Who are catechists?” Pope Francis asks. “They are people who keep the memory of God alive; they keep it alive in themselves and they are able to revive it in others.” Catechists are not only those who facilitate the faith development of our children. They are the folks we encounter every day who show us through their actions that God’s bountiful love and compassion is present in our world. “The contemporary world listens more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if it does listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses,” Pope Paul VI told us in 1975. In the 40-plus years since we heard those words first proclaimed, very little has changed. It is still the actions of people, more than their words, that move us, that form us, that heal us.

With deep appreciation, I note the hundreds of folks in our Christian communities who have accepted the invitation to play a formal role in the ministry of the catechist: those who work with our children, who prepare couples for marriage, who prepare parents for the baptism of their children, who accompany adults and children who seek initiation into the Roman Catholic faith, who visit the sick or the incarcerated, who reach out to the poor and the marginalized, who provide comfort to those who are in mourning.

And I remember with thankfulness and affection the multitudes of people who have shown me over and over again the unconditional love and mercy of God – my parents and grandparents, my aunts and uncles, my siblings, my husband, my children, my friends, my colleagues – ordinary

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“The Church is commissioned to announce the mercy of God, the beating heart of the Gospel, which in its own way must penetrate the heart and mind of every person.” (Misericordiae Vultus #12) Think of people who are announcing the mercy of God to you. Is it their words that do this? Is it the way they live their lives?

Announcing the Mercy of God: Jubilee for Catechists

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“The Church [is called to] ... proclaim the Gospel to the world of youth with courage and creativity.”

(General Directory for Catechesis, no. 181)
people living ordinary lives with grace in times of trial and pain, joy in times of hope and promise. The many whom God has put in my life to offer a hand of friendship and love so that my life is full and blessed; the many who live with courage in illness, with dignity in poverty and financial hardship; the many who challenge me to look at situations with a different lens; the many who have a much broader view of neighbour than my own; the many who teach me, encourage me and occasionally force me to be all that God means me to be. Sometimes this is by their words, and frequently it is through how they live. In all cases, those who are deliberate in their ministry of catechist and those who are simply being who they are have shown me over and over again who God is. In that, they are catechists.

Pope Francis says that “on the lips of the catechist, the first proclamation must ring out over and over: ‘Jesus Christ loves you; he gave his life to save you; and now he is living at your side every day to enlighten, strengthen and free you.’ This first proclamation is called ‘first’ … 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.” (Evangelii Gaudium, no. 164)

So many people have entered my life, for a short time or a long one, all placed there by a God who loves me, and is with me always … I think of them and am filled with love and gratitude.

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“If catechesis is done well, Christians will be eager to bear witness to their faith, to hand it on to their children, to make it known to others, and to serve the human community in every way.”

(Catechesi Tradendae, no. 24)
On Saturday, September 24, 2016, the Diocesan Office of Religious Education for the Diocese of Calgary gathered approximately 100 catechists at Holy Spirit Parish in Calgary to celebrate The World Jubilee for Catechists. Our morning started with a special Mass for the occasion.

Following the Mass, we listened to a marvellous presentation by Dan Lacroix on Fr. Albert Lacombe, OMI, whose centenary we are celebrating in Alberta this year. Fr. Lacombe was a zeal-filled catechist who brought the message of the Gospel to Indigenous people of our land. His “Catechetical Ladder” was one of the original catechetical tools used to help the Indigenous people of Alberta visualize God’s saving plan for humanity.

After our journey into our past, we were treated to a profound, faith-enriching presentation by renowned motivational Catholic speaker Michael Chiasson. Michael’s faith witness and inspired words rekindled within all of us the fire that motivates us to go out and spread the Good News to all we meet!

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The World Jubilee for Catechists celebration at Holy Spirit Parish in Calgary
On Sunday, September 25, 2016, the Church celebrated the Jubilee for Catechists called for by Pope Francis within the Extraordinary Jubilee for Mercy. To prepare catechists and catechetical leaders to enter into the Jubilee prayerfully, the Office for Catechesis and Evangelization at the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops produced a variety of reflections on Church teaching and the readings for the day. Here in the Diocese of Hamilton, we were inspired!

We wanted to offer a day of preparation for catechists across the diocese so that, on the actual Jubilee day, catechists could be present in their own parishes where they serve. We decided to host a half-day of reflection on the weekend prior to the Jubilee for Catechists where we would provide catechists with a reflection on the theme for the Jubilee, give them some background and context for the Jubilee of Mercy in general and this day for catechists in particular, and then allow them to prepare for the celebration of the Jubilee in reflecting upon the Gospel for the Jubilee day.

Bishop Daniel Miehm, Auxiliary Bishop of Hamilton, was our keynote speaker on the theme: “Announcing the Mercy of God.”

Bishop Miehm spoke about the very real challenges we face in our modern times, such as a general decrease of cultural awareness of the Christian message and a general decrease in church attendance. He encouraged us, however, saying that the Good News of Jesus Christ can still be proclaimed and still bears abundant fruit even if the ground sometimes seems inhospitable. He gave us three concrete ways in which catechists are to announce the mercy of God.

• First, we must know the Gospel. We must immerse ourselves in God’s Word in order to remain close to God.
• Second, we must stay close to the “friends of Jesus” – the saints. In knowing and studying their lives, we can be instructed and inspired to follow Jesus with sureness of faith despite hardships.
• Finally, he encouraged us to be witnesses to God’s mercy in our own lives. Quoting Pope Paul VI, Bishop Miehm reminded us that people listen “more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if [we] listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses.” (Evangelii Nuntiandi, no. 41)

Sister Mary Heather MacKinnon, DMin, School Sister of Notre Dame, gave a historical account of the origins of jubilee

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and helped us to see this particular jubilee in the context of this Extraordinary Year of Mercy. She spoke of the great teachings on mercy from our popes of the last 60 years, from Pope John XXIII to Pope Francis. She offered a beautiful reflection on Pope Francis’ motto, *miserando atque eligendo* – often translated as “by having mercy, and by choosing” – and called on the catechists to continue to reflect on God’s mercy in reflecting on the Holy Father’s letter *Misericordiae Vultus*. As a good teacher and long-time catechist, Sister Mary Heather had us pause and chat with one another often throughout the reflection, and all enjoyed the time of sharing.

Our day of reflection ended with a *Visio Divina* that I led on the Gospel for the Jubilee for Catechists: the story of the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31). As in *Lectio Divina*, we explored Scripture through the slow, meditative reading of it, but we were especially fortunate to have the Saint John’s Bible – the first handwritten and illuminated Bible in over 500 years – to assist with our reflection. The illumination of this parable in particular, with the scene from Hades and the rich man desperately calling to Abraham, who cradles Lazarus in his arms, provided yet another window onto the meaning of this Gospel. As we shared around the room of over 100 catechists, one woman said, “I see the man in Hades, and it looks hopeless, but even in Hades he still speaks of God’s mercy. It makes me think: God’s mercy is everywhere!”

I am grateful to the many catechists who joined us and to all those who were unable to be with us but who serve so faithfully in their parishes across our diocese. The day of preparation was a great witness to me that catechists are willing and prayerfully continue to do their best to announce the mercy of God to a world that is so in need of Good News!

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In the Diocese of Saint-Jean-Longueuil, Quebec, we are beginning the implementation of new catechetical orientations. The main purpose is to give voice to the Word of God in the form of community Lectio Divina.

Moving away from a catechesis that has been compartmentalized according to age groups and content, we have chosen to bring generations together in sharing the Word of God through a continually renewed experience. Inspired by the practice of Lectio Divina that nurtures spirituality by listening to the Word of God in a community setting, we believe that the Spirit will do the work of generating and renewing our Church, since “the Word of God is living and effective” (Hebrews 4:12).

The context will be what we call inclusive intergenerational community gatherings (in French, rassemblements communautaires intergénérationnels inclusifs, or RCII). Anyone, regardless of age, will be able to join these gatherings and so be introduced to or deepen his or her faith. The catechetical content is organized according to the structure of the liturgical seasons, which reveal the mystery of Christ in the yearly cycle. Through a kerygmatic catechesis – the key to which is in the Paschal Mystery – we are invited to take the path of the disciples of Emmaus, believing that Christ is waiting for us there to enlighten our hearts and minds, and will set us on fire and make us missionary disciples.

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Jubilee for Catechists in the Archdiocese of Vancouver

On the morning of Saturday, October 8, 2016, the Archdiocese of Vancouver celebrated the Jubilee for Catechists at Holy Rosary Cathedral. The universal Church celebrated this event on September 25, but our archdiocese marked the occasion on Thanksgiving weekend, as we have done for the past few years.

Archbishop Michael Miller honoured and thanked our catechists in union with the universal Church through a special Mass starting at 9:30 a.m. A social gathering featuring a simple reception and a brief reflection by the archbishop followed. Those invited included catechists of adults and children in RCIA, parish religious education programs, children’s Liturgy of the Word, and youth ministry, together with their families and friends.

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Inclusive Intergenerational Community Gatherings in the Diocese of Saint-Jean-Longueuil
In March 2014, a group of representatives from the parishes in the English sector of the Archdiocese of Moncton began meeting to discuss the catechesis of children. This is a diocese that has had no Roman Catholic school system for a long time. We count exclusively on parishes to provide children’s catechesis. We gathered primarily to choose a new catechism resource for the parishes’ catechetical programs, but declining enrollment in these programs surfaced as a concern early in our conversation. We quickly realized that before we could begin looking at programs and resources, we needed to look at process.

Pope Francis calls on all of us to share “again and again,” in all ways possible, the Good News that Jesus Christ loves us. It is important that parents and children alike continue to hear the message. So regardless of which resource was chosen to replace Born of the Spirit, the group decided that parents would play a more active role in the faith development of their children.

This decision is reinforced by the General Directory for Catechesis, which tells us that parents have the primary responsibility for the faith education of their children. Our experience has shown us that while the parish does an adequate job of catechizing children, we are mere substitutes for their parents. We know that the faith formation of children is enhanced when parents are deeply engaged in the process.

Parents can be a part of their children’s catechetical lives in several ways. Because of the fundamental principle of parents as primary catechists, some parishes in our diocese have been involving parents in their children’s catechism programs, on one level or another, for several years. Other parishes, though, have maintained a weekly or bi-weekly drop-off system for children’s catechesis.

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With the start of the catechetical year this fall, all parishes in the English sector have adopted parent coaching for their children's catechesis programs. Parents accompany their children to each session, journeying alongside them as both grow in faith. Using this model will, we believe, give parents the language of faith so they can share their faith with their children more effectively.

The catechist/coach partners with parents, guiding them in conversations so that both child and parent can feel comfortable talking about issues of faith and how our faith relates to and is lived out in the everyday as we play and work, while we are at school, at our homes, at work, at the rink or on the basketball court. Ideally, there is one parent and one child at each table working through the sessions together. People live busy lives today, and parents are not always able to attend each of these sessions. In that case, another adult who plays an important role in the child’s life – a grandparent, aunt or uncle, godparent, or close adult friend of the family – is welcome to come with the child.

Parent coaching offers an occasion for parents to have quality time with their child, which is often difficult today. Parents who have participated in this process have told us that they appreciate the opportunity to have conversations with their children about faith, family morals and values and have discovered teachable moments during the day, surfacing from what was discussed at catechism sessions.

Will we have any more success with this process than others we’ve used? That remains to be seen. But certainly, nothing but good can come from providing parents with one-on-one time with their child in a safe environment that supports them as they set about sharing with one another the God experiences of their lives.

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HELPFUL LINKS FOR CATECHISTS

CATECHIST FORMATION
• Newman Theological College Benedict XVI Institute for New Evangelization – Edmonton, AB
• Saint Paul University – Ottawa, ON
• Dayton University – Dayton, OH
  Virtual Learning Community for Faith Formation
• St. Francis Xavier University – Antigonish, NS

PUBLISHERS
• CCCB
• Novalis
• Our Sunday Visitor
• RCL Benziger
• Pflaum
• Sadlier Religion
• Loyola Press

OTHER LINKS
• Jubilee for Catechists Resources – CCCB
• Criteria for Catechesis – CCCB

“THE CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY NOT ONLY GIVES MUCH TO THOSE WHO ARE BEING CATECHIZED BUT ALSO RECEIVES MUCH FROM THEM.”

(General Directory for Catechesis, no. 221)

UPCOMING EVENTS

• Being a Church of Mercy Conference
  Saint Paul University, Ottawa, ON
  November 4-5, 2016
• Parish Vitality Conference
  Montreal, QC
  November 10-12, 2016
• Canadian Catholic Youth Ministry Network Conference (CCYMN)
  Winnipeg, MB
  November 18-20, 2016
• National Conference for Catechetical Leadership
  Dallas, TX
  May 22-25, 2017

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