

I Introduction

- A Thank you for coming today and for volunteering to be a CCD teacher or helper this year. Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount that those who keep his commandments and teach others to do the same will be called “great” in the kingdom. I know you’re not doing things just for compliments, but this compliment from the Savior is about the greatest one can ever receive.
- B What I hope to do today during this holy hour is first to pray before our Lord:
 - 1 To pray for ourselves as teachers of the Catholic faith, that God the Father and the Son will send us the Holy Spirit to help us in this all-important task.
 - 2 To pray for our kids and their families, so that our kids may learn and live what the Church seeks to impart to them through us this year.
- C The second thing I hope to do is to give a little formation during the Holy Hour about a method to impart the faith which I believe is particularly important today so that the kids we’re privileged to serve not only learn the faith but desire to live it their entire life long.
- D With regard to catechetical instruction I think often to the comments of Archbishop Diarmuid Martin of Dublin, that Irish kids and adults are among the most catechized children on earth, but the least evangelized. They’ve memorized their acts of contrition. They can recite all the commandments, beatitudes, corporal and spiritual works of mercy and more, but it hasn’t sunk in. They don’t live it. They study it the way some students study foreign languages in classrooms, memorizing lots of vocabulary, perhaps taking tests, but never immersing themselves in the language by speaking it. Our goal must be more than catechesis, but the real evangelization of these young people.
- E We’re entering into the year of faith, which is going to be a year of many graces for the entire Church, but I believe that there are going to be many particular graces for catechists, first to grow in faith and second to pass the faith on with effectiveness. In order for us to profit from these graces, personally and pedagogically, we need to grasp a traditional theological distinction about faith:
 - 1 Fides qua — the trust by which we believe in God. The trust that led Abraham to leave Ur and follow the Lord not knowing where he’d end up, to trust even at 99 that he would become a father. The trust that led a 14 year old girl in Nazareth to believe that, remaining a virgin, she would not only become a mother but become a mother of the Son of God. The trust that has inspired so many martyrs to remain faithful even in the midst of terrible tortures because they knew by faith that the tortures were like the pains of childbirth before entering into eternity with God.
 - 2 Fides quae — the content of our faith. What we believe on the basis of our trust in God. We believe in God, who sent his Son, who founded a Church, to which he sent the Holy Spirit to guide it into all truth. That’s why we believe what the Church teaches.
- F This Year of Faith is not just supposed to be a Year of Catechesis, but a Year in which we grow in entrusting ourselves to the Lord. In fact, our catechetical instruction as a whole is meant to evangelize these kids, to help them to live by faith, like Abraham, like Mary, like the Martyrs, like the Saints, like so many people we’ve been privileged to know. The question is how to do that effectively. Few will ever gain this trust from a textbook. That’s what I’d like to talk about in this conference during our Holy Hour of Prayer together.

II Connecting kids to Jesus.

- A I’m convinced that everything we do, every truth of the faith we communicate, needs to be connected to a trust they have in Jesus. Everything we teach and do should flow from Jesus and lead

them to Jesus. This is the way that in communicating the fides quae, we'll strengthen their fides qua. This is the way they will get the big picture, to see how everything fits together.

- B Jesus is our teacher. The teacher.
 - 1 Matt 23: 8 But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all students. 9 And call no one your father on earth, for you have one Father — the one in heaven. 10 Nor are you to be called instructors, for you have one instructor, the Messiah. 11 The greatest among you will be your servant.
- C Jesus is our one teacher. That's a title he used for himself twice. "The Teacher says, "My time is near..." "You call me Teacher and Lord — and you are right, for that is what I am" (Jn 13:13).
- D Jesus' great compassion is shown in his teaching
 - 1 Mark 6:34 As he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd; **and he began to teach them many things.**
 - 2 He was always teaching, in synagogues, on mountainsides, from boats, in the temple porticoes, along the journeys.
- E His teaching is the true foundation of life
 - 1 Matt. 7: 24 "Everyone then who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock. 25 The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on rock. 26 And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not act on them will be like a foolish man who built his house on sand. 27 The rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell — and great was its fall!" 28 Now when Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were astounded at his teaching, 29 for he taught them as one having authority, and not as their scribes."
- F We are all students, disciples, zealous and trying to form others to be the same.
- G Too often our catechetical programs are concerned too much with students' memorizing the ten commandments, or the eight beatitudes, or the seven corporal works of mercy, etc. We need to help them synthesize it all, and then start to think with the worldview of a Catholic.
- H Practically, we need to relate everything we're teaching to Jesus the Savior, so that they can see Jesus in everything and everyone:
 - 1 We need to introduce them to Jesus and through Jesus to the Father and Holy Spirit he reveals.
 - 2 We need to introduce them to Jesus and through Jesus to his mother and to the Saints who lived his life and made Him their treasure.
 - 3 We need to introduce them to Jesus and through Jesus to the Church he founded.
 - 4 We need to introduce them to Jesus and through Jesus the Sacraments in which we receive His very life.
 - 5 We need to introduce them to Jesus and through Jesus to his morality based on love. Morality isn't a list of do's and don'ts so much as it is a participation in Jesus' own life, allowing Jesus to live within us.
 - 6 We need to introduce them to Jesus and through Jesus to the states that last forever, heaven, hell, and purgatory.
- I Everything we do needs to come from Jesus and lead back to Jesus.
- J Therefore, teaching religion is completely different from teaching math, English, history or any other subject.
 - 1 We're not principally teaching them *about* Jesus and what he did, like, for example, we pray in the Creed; our goal is not to have them know *about* Jesus.
 - 2 Our goal is to help them get to know Jesus personally, like you know another human being, to get to know first hand his wisdom, power, mercy.
 - 3 Not just savior, but connaitre. Not saber, but conhecer.

III Catching them for Christ

- A Especially with older kids, faith is “caught” not “taught.”
- B We need to pass on a hunger, an enthusiasm.
- C They need to perceive in us a love, a contagious enthusiasm for Jesus our Master, Lord and Savior, whom we know and whom we’re bursting to introduce them to.
- D They need to see and learn from us why Jesus is the most important person in the whole universe, the one who is the truth who sets us free, who makes us so joyful, who gives us His trust and whom we trust.
- E In other words, we have to help them *fall in love* with Jesus through our eyes.
- F To help us learn how to do that, we can use our imagination.
- G Imagine if Mary were teaching our CCD class and introducing them to Jesus.
 - 1 What would she say?
 - 2 What would be the expression on her face?
 - 3 Would she do so with a tender, loving smile and contagious joy?
 - 4 Would she describe with amazement the appearance of the Archangel Gabriel?
 - 5 What it was like to be hunted down when he was a baby and later on in his life?
 - 6 What it was like to raise him and take him to the temple?
 - 7 What it was like to see him hammered and bleeding from a Cross?
 - 8 What was it like to be assumed body and soul into heaven?
 - 9 Would she do it from a book or try to persuade them directly why Jesus is so important?
- H Imagine if Mary Magdalene were teaching your students and introducing them to Jesus.
 - 1 Would she do it with tears of joy?
 - 2 Would she mention how she had once washed his feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair?
 - 3 Would she mention how it was to have seven demons expunged from her?
 - 4 Would she mention with what passion he used to preach to the crowds?
 - 5 Would she mention with what love he used to heal the sick?
 - 6 Would she mention how scared she was seeing her Love brutally killed by brutal soldiers hammering him to a tree?
 - 7 Would she mention those terrible three days, thinking they had killed Jesus once and for all?
 - 8 Would she mention her angst at seeing his body taken away, and then hearing her name, “Mary!” from Jesus and her tremendous surprise and joy?
 - 9 Would she mention what it was like to be the first bearer of the great news of the Resurrection to the Apostles, who would in turn bring it to the end of the world?
- I Imagine if St. Peter were teaching your students.
 - 1 Would he tell how Jesus called him from his fishing boat and, even though he was a sinful man and told Jesus so, left everything immediately when Jesus called him?
 - 2 Would he tell the kids about what it was like to be able to walk on stormy water to Jesus by God’s power, as long as he kept his eyes on Jesus?
 - 3 Would he tell them about his bitter tears when he denied the Lord three times and how many nightmares he had hearing the cock crowing?
 - 4 Would he tell them about the mission Jesus gave him to be the rock on whom He would build his Church and, later, being called Satan because he didn’t believe that the Messiah should suffer?
 - 5 Would he tell them about the great gift the Lord gave him in asking him three times if he loved him and then receiving the mission to feed his sheep and tend his lambs?
- J Now, you. What’s your story? What’s your take on Jesus?
 - 1 Each one of us has to try to introduce these kids to a living person, to Jesus, who is as alive for us as he was for Peter, Mary Magdalene, the Blessed Mother.

- 2 This personal witness will be what catches the kid's attention and leaves them with something they'll never forget.
- 3 This is where we need to spend our work in preparation, so that we can be lit on fire with love for Jesus like the saints and pass on that love so that the kids will hunger to get to know Jesus themselves.

IV The importance of *what* we teach and *how* we teach it.

- A The first thing is what we teach.
 - 1 We need to teach what Jesus entrusted to his Church, all of it, including the tough stuff, faith and morals.
 - 2 The kids have a right to it.
 - 3 We also have the duty, along with their parents, to pass it on.
- B The second thing is how we teach it.
 - 1 We need to challenge them to live up to it. So often we can think that we're wasting our time, that they'll never really live up to the full Gospel, but with God all things are possible. We need to give them the confidence that we do believe that they're better than the world thinks they are, that they can live up to God's expectations and do so with love.
 - 2 But we need to teach it with contagious faith, with burning love, with lively hope and with a genuine humility.
 - 3 Since more than 80% of communication is non-verbal, the experts say, we have to realize that these virtues are crucial to the students' getting the message.
 - 4 In order for us to teach the faith well, we need to get to know it and then we have to transmit it with enthusiasm and passion.
 - a The Catechism of the Catholic Church, published 20 years ago this year, is a great resource for knowing the faith. The more we come to know the faith, the more we make it our own and impart it accurately in our own words. The YouCat is a great place for us to begin.
 - b Accuracy is key, especially with certain mysteries like the Eucharist, because the kids will trust what we say. To call the Eucharist "bread" and the precious blood "wine" is a great disservice to the students, because they won't realize the truth that there's no bread or wine left at all after the transubstantiation.
 - 5 Most importantly, to teach the faith well we need to live it — or at least be striving to live it — well.
 - a We can get to know reasons from the "inside" that we would never be able to learn from a book.
 - b We really can't teach about the spiritual benefits of fasting, for example, unless we've learned them from personal experience. Or of prayer. Or of living a moral life.

V What if we find ourselves intimidated by the difficulty of teaching Catholic religious instruction?

- A Sometimes we can become intimidated by how much we don't know, how poorly sometimes we can communicate things, how insufficiently the kids are learning the material.
- B I'd like to mention two things to keep in mind:
 - 1 The Story of the best and most effective CCD teacher I ever had.
 - a His name was Ed Mullen.
 - b He was a plumber.
 - c He could barely read.
 - d We used to tease him in 8th grade CCD about the fact he couldn't read, the fact he really couldn't explain well anything he was asked to do. We used to query about why he even came.

- e I'll never forget his response. He said he saw that the parish was desperate for CCD teachers, that no one was volunteering, and so he said that he would come and try to do the best he can, so that kids could learn about the "most important thing of all," which is Jesus and his love.
 - f I'll never forget, too, the impression that made on me. This man loved Jesus so much that he would be willing to suffer all types of puerile insults from naughty 8th-graders to pass on to us the "most important thing of all." His witness has always moved me.
 - g Sometimes the Lord can use our weaknesses, our incapacities, our short-comings to teach even more than he can use our talents.
 - h So if you're ever thinking that you're not really being effective, keep trying: you just might be by your patience and good-will forming future priests.
- 2 The parable of the sower, seed and soil.
- a You remember Jesus' parable.
 - b The seed, the Word of God, is perfect.
 - c Sometimes there's nothing wrong at all with the sower, us.
 - d Sometimes the problem is in the soil.
 - e Jesus described four types of soil:
 - i The seed that falls along the path, hardened by constant trodding, stubborn to receive the word of God. The seed ends up just being plucked up by the birds, by the devil.
 - ii The seed that falls among rocky soil, which initially receives the seed with joy, the seed begins to grow, but withers because of a lack of depth. We're living in a very superficial world. Many times the kids only think about God in the same way we used to think about Santa Claus and the tooth fairy. There's no real depth to it, no real-life link, especially to the Cross, which every disciple of Jesus needs as the key to open up the mysteries of God.
 - iii The seed that falls among thorny soil, that initially grows but then is choked by worldly anxieties and the pleasures of the world. It's not choked necessarily by sins, but by mundane cares and pleasures.
 - iv The seed that falls among good soil, which bears fruit in acts of love. And a lot of fruit!
- 3 Knowing this parable, we need to derive from it a few lessons to guide us:
- a We have to keep in mind the context and teach to the context.
 - b We have to help the kids become deeper as human beings, so that the seed can be sown more deeply.
 - c We have to directly confront in CCD the worldly cares and pleasures that they have, to try to make sure that neither chokes the seed. If they're worried about their mom being beaten by their dad, it's hard for them to focus on Jesus right now. If they're already into drugs or into sexual activity or into playing games all day on a play station or playing sports, it's going to be hard to make sure the seed isn't choked by these thorns. We need to help them to see these thorns and prevent that they destroy their faith.
 - d We have to challenge them to bear fruit in acts of love, so that the seed be planted ever more deeply in their lives.
 - e We have to be humble enough to admit that sometimes the seed just doesn't take.

VI Back to Jesus

- A Jesus is the alpha and the omega, the beginning and the end, the one from whom everything we teach, say and do in CCD flows, and the one toward which everything we're doing must be directed.
 - 1 We live in a world in which the kids don't see the big picture.

- 2 To show them how everything flows from, and leads to, Jesus in our own faith, in our world, in our lives, is a tremendous gift.
- B So when we're teaching, our homework, our prep time, is best spent by trying to see for ourselves, so that we can pass it on to them, how it comes from and returns to Jesus.
- 1 If we're teaching about the Church, we can show how Jesus founded it, and then how it's meant to lead us to Jesus here in this world through the Sacraments, through Sacred Scripture, etc., and to Jesus in the next, where he's gone to prepare a place for us.
 - 2 If we're teaching about the communion of saints, we can frame it by showing how these people tried to live as Jesus did and now are with Jesus in heaven.
 - 3 If we're trying to teach about the importance of attending Mass on Sunday, we can show how Jesus himself was always going to the synagogue on the Sabbath, how he told us he was eagerly desiring to eat the Passover with Him before he suffered, how he told us to keep the commandments, how he speaks to us in the Mass and feeds us with his body and blood, and how Mass on earth is a participation in the divine liturgy in heaven.
 - 4 If we're teaching about confession, we can emphasize that Jesus is the one who sent the apostles out with the power to forgive sins, how Jesus is the one who forgives us through bishops and priests, and how the forgiveness of sins allows God's life to live inside of us in this world and makes the next world with Jesus possible.
- C Once we get good at thinking in these terms, we can help the students learn how to do the same, so that with everything in the faith they can see how it leads from Jesus and leads back to Jesus.

VII Post-baptismal catechumenate

- A I want to finish our reflections today with what CCD is in the eyes of the Church and what its purpose is.
- B CCD is basically a post-baptismal catechumenate.
- C In the early Church, the catechumenate was an intense period of formation, normally for adults, done in stages, to acquaint them with the Catholic faith in such a way that they would not only know the faith and love it, but live it, even in the face of persecution and the threat of death. It was not just instruction. It was a genuine training to help them remain faithful even when people were threatening them with torture. So many did remain faithful, from young kids to senior citizens.
- D They were able to remain faithful because in the catechumenate they were not introduced to a series of isolated doctrines, but to the Trinitarian God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The Christian life was a life in union with God and with others in God. The Christian life was not obedience to a series of teachings but fidelity to a person who is the Way, Truth and the Life.
- E As I was conveying earlier, in our teaching of CCD, we need to keep this in mind. We are now preparing kids to seek a life of faith in the midst of a culture that's very hostile to the faith. We're preparing them, sometimes in the midst of families that do not practice the faith. We need to prepare them to be strong, even if they have to suffer.
- F CCD programs, in general, despite the hard work of CCD teachers, have been doing a pretty poor job overall in preparing kids to remain faithful. So many kids drop out of the practice of the faith after going through a CCD program. We just have to admit it and do what we can, with God's help, to reverse the trend. One of the tasks of CCD is precisely to try to form kids to remain faithful by assisting them, training them, to put the faith into action, to help the teaching truly come alive in life, and to try to inoculate them from the various spiritual viruses that afflict teenagers and young adults and lead them to wander away from the Lord.
- 1 We need to help them look at Christ's teachings and values not as "inherited values" only but "personal values." We need to help them recognize that it's not just "my parents' faith" or my "vavo's faith" that they're learning, but their own.
 - 2 We need to challenge them to greatness, to be able to do something that's hard. Our culture seeks to prepare a bunch of spiritual wimps, who might be pushed to do something great on the sports field, but are never called to do something great for God. We need to help them to persevere in the faith, even when they don't feel like it.

- 3 We need to help them learn how to suffer. Sign of the Cross at baptism. Suffering is not a sign that God opposes you or that you did something wrong, but is part of our training, something that's supposed to make us better, where God is trying to draw good out of evil, to force us to be humble, to help us die to ourselves, to force us to become good Samaritans of others.
 - 4 We need to really help them to learn how to pray and pray on their own, to recognize that God is real, that he wants to help them in all their circumstances. Our culture is one of a practical atheism, in which many live in their day-to-day life as if God doesn't exist. God doesn't influence the way the eat, dress, use the internet, go to school, go to work. If we're ever going to help them learn how to live a Christian life, we have to help them learn how to pray. So please help them to do it. This is not just saying vocal prayers, which are important, but also spontaneous prayers in which they ask God for what they need, praise him, thank him and say sorry.
- G I'd like to finish with the catechesis given in Japan a few centuries ago that helped young kids remain faithful in the midst of suffering and hardship greater than any of our kids will face. I've always found this inspirational as a student and teacher of Christ.
- 1 Of the 35,000 martyrs killed in Japan between 1597-1639, there were many children.
 - 2 One mother, Tecla Hashimoto, pregnant with her seventh child, was crucified together with her three year-old daughter, Luisa. A pile of wood at the bottom of their joint cross was set on fire to increase their agony, as her other children were suffering the same fate nearby. "Lord Jesus," she prayed aloud, "receive these children." When her eldest daughter cried out that she could no longer see her on account of the flames engulfing them, Tecla answered joyfully, "Don't worry! In a little while you will see everything clearly."
 - 3 Such accounts of the martyrdom of children are the most moving of all. After watching his father be beheaded, five year-old Peter Hatori ran over to his father's lifeless body, removed his kimono, knelt down, joined his hands in prayer and presented his uncovered neck to the executioners. They were so stunned by the boy's actions that they misfired on their intended lethal blow, instead cutting through the boy's shoulder and sending him to the ground. Without complaining about what must have been enormous pain, Peter just lifted himself up on his knees and continued praying. He extended his neck once again and was killed, while calling on the names of Jesus and Mary.
 - 4 How did such holy audacity ever become so routine among even the youngest generations of Japanese Catholics? It was because, from the beginning, they knew the cost of discipleship and never sought to water it down. Christ called them to love as he had loved them, and so they were willing to be crucified just as Christ was. They believed in his promises, not just that if others hated him they would hate them as well but also that if they lost their lives for his sake they would gain them anew forever.
 - 5 It was also because priests would explicitly prepare parents, and parents their children, for martyrdom.
 - 6 That preparation began with prayer. Kids learned that when they made the Sign of the Cross, they were expressing their unity with Christ on the Cross and preparing themselves to pick up their crosses and follow him first to death and then to resurrection. They understood that the Eucharist was not just a liturgical rite, but a true participation in Christ's passion, death and resurrection. When they prayed the mysteries of the Rosary, they saw that before they could share in the glorious mysteries, they first needed to enter into the sorrowful ones.
 - 7 The preparation extended to practical instruction as well. Mothers trained their kids how to be faithful at the supreme hour. They taught them how to uncover their necks, fold their hands and look to heaven, as well as what to pray when their own hour came. They breast-fed them the stories of the heroic deaths of the apostles, the early Christian martyrs, and the Japanese martyrs before them, and inspired them to strive for similar greatness.

- H This was what the catechumenate did, to prepare people to be faithful to Christ even under duress. This is what we're called to do. This is admittedly a very high goal and we're certainly sowing in soil that has a lot of rocks or thorns. But the same Holy Spirit that helped them will help us. We have to trust in him. Let's do what we can. Jesus was speaking about us when he said in his valedictory at his Ascension: Matt. 28:18 "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. 19 Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, 20 and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."
- I Jesus, faithful to his promise, is here on the altar with us. Let us together ask him for the help we need.