

Be My Disciples:

A Balanced Approach

TO CHILDREN'S CATECHESIS



The *Be My Disciples* curriculum is based on a balanced approach to children's faith formation. In essence, this means that *Be My Disciples* incorporates

a balance between content, methodology, and a challenge to discipleship to initiate learners into the faith. It shares the Christian story in a catechumenal model, using reflection on Scripture and doctrine, plus liturgical celebration in every class and during all the major seasons of the Church year. *Be My Disciples* initiates children into the community of faith and challenges them to take up the mission of the Gospel.

The term *balanced approach* has been used in reading education to describe a way to bridge the differences between phonics and "whole language" strategies for teaching reading. Many older catechists will remember learning to read through a phonics-based methodology. They learned the rules first, then applied them as they built word attack, spelling, and composition skills. In a whole language approach, there is less emphasis on rules at the outset, and children are encouraged to begin reading by offering them simple texts so that they can gain a sense of accomplishment quickly. Simultaneously, they are invited right away to compose their own sentences and paragraphs to express themselves, with no early judgment made on their skills in sentence construction or spelling.

This was the rationale: Having gained confidence in their ability to read and write quickly, the children could then step back and learn the rules that would allow greater

accuracy and grammatical precision. Over time, researchers and teachers noticed that, while a whole language approach insured greater comprehension, discovery, and creativity, children often grew up without ever learning to spell well. Nor did they learn the nuances of grammatical construction. So a balanced approach was attempted that would allow for a blending of the phonics and whole language approaches in the classroom.

If we look at the history of modern catechesis, we see a similar evolution. In the twentieth century, up to the time of the Second Vatican Council, children's religious education was mostly centered on rote learning of catechism questions and answers. There was limited emphasis on application and integration of learning and, even though we were taught that God was all good and thereby deserving of all our love and good behavior, moral formation was more commonly centered on the effects of sin and the punishments that accrued from bad actions.

Vatican II brought a revolutionary change in thinking. As religious educators reflected on the implications of a newly rediscovered theology that saw God as both transcendent and immanent, or deeply present in the universe, the style of catechesis shifted. In fact, even the recovery of the word *catechesis* was part of the shift. Catechesis comes from a Greek word that means "to echo or resound the teaching." It implies an interactive process between the catechist, the learner, and the Holy Spirit who empowers the process. Catechesis became a dynamic process in which the catechist facilitated a process of discovery

Excerpt from *Be My Disciples Program Director's Manual* © 2013 RCL Benziger. Used by permission. Permission granted is for ministry purposes only and not for resale.

©2013 RCL Publishing LLC



inviting the learner to reflect on his or her experience and to uncover the ways in which God was present within it. For a time, while doctrine was certainly present, reflection

on experience became

the most important focus of catechesis, leading to the critique that the post-Vatican II era was one of “balloons, banners, and burlap” in which the importance of doctrinal formulations had been lost. There was some truth to this critique, but the early years after the Council were an attempt to re-introduce the importance of integration with life that had been de-emphasized during the Baltimore Catechism era.

Within a decade, correctives were provided through the work of such esteemed religious educators as Thomas Groome, Anne Marie Mongoven, Carl Pfeiffer and Janaan Manternach, and Fr. Gerard Weber. All worked to restore a balance between reflection on experience and engagement with the core teachings of the Catholic faith. The goal of catechesis became the integration of doctrine and experience, leading to a life lived for the sake of the Gospel. Their insights reflected the guidance given by the Church in the 1970s through the *General Catechetical Directory* and the *National Catechetical Directory*.

In 1987, the promulgation of *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* led to a clearer articulation of doctrine in catechetical texts. However, some publishers responded with such a heavy emphasis on doctrine that the insights of experience-based catechesis and the sharing of the important stories and events of Sacred Scripture were sometimes lost.

Be My Disciples is an attempt to restore the relationship among a number of vital elements in the catechesis of children and their families. Each era in catechesis has been a step forward, and none of its insights should be lost, but they need to be kept in balance. The *Be My Disciples* balanced approach seeks to integrate three important elements. In every chapter of every grade level, *Be My Disciples*:

- **Invites** children to discipleship through a dynamic methodology of reflection on experience that incorporates the latest findings in brain research, psycho-social development, and emotional intelligence.
- **Teaches**, reinforces, and extends knowledge of Scripture, Catholic doctrine, and the Church year *every year in every grade* through RCL Benziger’s unique spiral structure.
- **Challenges** children to a deeper integration of faith and life by leading them to higher levels of thinking and encouraging a weekly faith choice. The children learn how the Catholic Tradition can inform their life choices and transform them as they journey to God together.

Through the power of the Holy Spirit, young people and their families who use *Be My Disciples* are invited to accept the call to be disciples of his Son, Jesus Christ, and to take up the mission of his Church.

For Reflection

- What was the nature of your own childhood catechesis? What were its strengths and challenges?
- As you look at the three elements of the balanced approach to catechesis, in which area do you feel the most equipped and in which are you in need of further growth?