



WHAT IS A

Spiral Structure?

Every curriculum has a particular approach or structure. Some countries use what might be called a mastery approach. In this style of curriculum development, students are introduced to only a few topics that they explore in depth, with little repetition of content, until they master the topics. This approach has some parallels to the thematic structure used for many years in catechesis in the United States. In this approach, children focus on a single theme each year, such as Church, morality, or Sacraments.

Today in the United States, most general curricula use another structure—a spiral structure. This structure is rooted in an understanding that children must work with key concepts again and again before they master them. In a spiral structure there is a logical sequence across the grades through which important topics are introduced, taught, retaught, and reinforced.

The spiral structure was named and developed by an American educator named Jerome Bruner. Dr. Bruner believed that a curriculum should organize itself “around the great issues, principles, and values that a society deems worthy of the continual concern of its members” (*The Process of Education*, Harvard University Press, 1960). But a spiral structure includes more than information. Dr. Bruner understood that cognitive growth, culture, and experience also play important roles in learning. New experiences and engagement with the world lead children to refilter what they have been taught and to process it at higher and higher levels of thinking.

A THREE-PART FOUNDATION

Be My Disciples incorporates the spiral structure into its presentation of the Catholic faith. For Catholics the foundational “issues, principles, and values” that we want to hand on are Sacred Tradition, Sacred Scripture, and the observance of our liturgical year. *Be My Disciples* incorporates all three in what we might call a triple spiral structure that weaves together to present the full story of faith.

- **Sacred Tradition.** Children in grades 1–6 are introduced in developmentally appropriate ways to the core concepts of Catholic Tradition through twenty-four doctrine chapters each year. The six units of the *Be My Disciples* student books are organized according to the first three pillars of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. There are two units devoted to each of these three pillars: We Believe (our creed), We Worship (our liturgy), and We Live (our moral code). The fourth pillar, prayer and spirituality, is incorporated throughout all units. As the children grow, they revisit and expand their knowledge as new information is presented about these topics in succeeding grades.
- **Sacred Scripture.** Scripture stories and passages are a key feature of *Be My Disciples*. Each unit begins with a proclamation of a related Scripture story or passage, and each chapter begins with a prayerful reflection on Scripture. Additional stories and passages allow a clear relationship between Scripture and Tradition to be shown.
- **Liturgical Year.** Young people have the opportunity to celebrate up to fifteen seasonal celebrations each year. These

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two-page lessons are easily incorporated into weekly lessons as an extension of the closing prayer.

A DYNAMIC PROCESS

A spiral structure must be more than the transmission of information about our Catholic faith. Think of the structure as the foundation for a balanced approach in which the young person can discover the richness of Catholicism and learn and practice the ways in which its stories and teachings can provide a path to discipleship.

Every *Be My Disciples* lesson incorporates a simple three-step process to teach the chapter content:

Explore. Children come with varying degrees of prior knowledge about and experiences of the chapter focus. Every chapter begins by asking children to share where the chapter topic may have touched their human experience. They reflect on a short related Scripture passage. Next, they learn about a Saint, holy person, or ministry of the Church related to the chapter theme.

Discover. As you address each of the three lesson concepts that support the chapter focus, a variety of teaching strategies make the concepts interesting and understandable. After each concept, a discussion question or activity will help the children express their understanding and begin to apply it to life.

Decide. After you present the three lesson concepts, an integration activity on the I Follow Jesus page helps the children incorporate the lesson concepts into their lives. They conclude by making a concrete Faith Choice to guide their actions in the week ahead.

This dynamic teaching process has a number of benefits for the children.

- * It respects the children's preferred learning styles and the many ways they may need to express their learning.
- * It respects their need to know where they fit into the Church's story and to explore other ways they might be involved in it.
- * It respects their natural desire to make a difference in the world and helps them learn to bring justice and care to God's people.

CONCLUSION

Be My Disciples places a strong emphasis on helping young people gain faith knowledge through its spiral structure. But if you become too absorbed with *what* you are teaching, you can forget *why* you are teaching it. The heart of the child is at the center of the catechetical process. Your mission is to lead children to Jesus—to do more than to teach *about* who he is. The goal of all catechesis is to help people know the Lord in their hearts and to choose to follow him. This heart knowledge is at the center of conversion. The content of the spiral structure provides the foundation for the journey of faith. As you use the *Be My Disciples* spiral structure and its dynamic balanced approach to catechesis, you will begin to see how all of the parts fit together to create an experience that deepens faith—for you and your learners.

For Reflection

- What advantages do you see to a spiral structure in teaching faith concepts?
- What can you do to insure that children learn to know Jesus in their hearts as well as in their heads?

