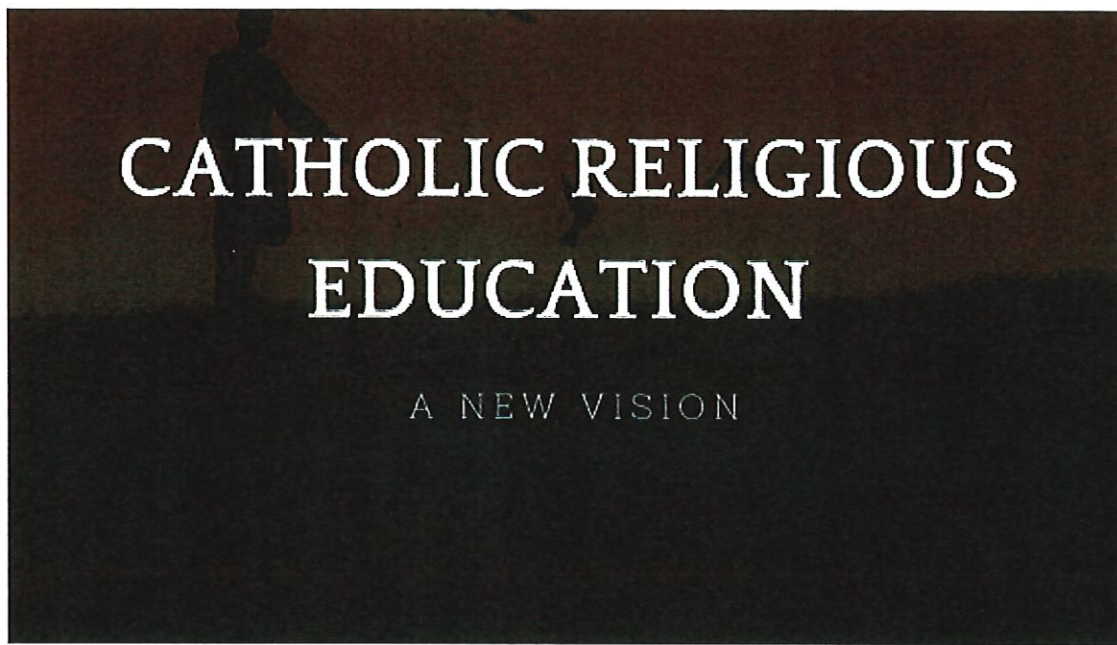


A NEW VISION FOR CATHOLIC RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

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<https://www.thereligionteacher.com/new-vision/>



If we were to evaluate the impact of our religious education programs in the Catholic Church today based solely on the number of students whose lives were transformed, do you think we would score well?

What if our religious education programs and children's ministries were measured by the number of disciples that we made in our classrooms? (By disciples I mean what Sherry Weddell calls "[intentional disciples](#)" and Matthew Kelly calls "[dynamic Catholics](#).")

How well do you think we would do based only on that metric?

I'll be honest. I don't think we're doing well.

And that's not for lack of trying.

As I travel the country giving keynotes and workshops to teachers, catechists, and catechetical leaders, I hear similar stories and concerns in conversations I am having everywhere I go. The conversations I have at home in my own parish are similar as well. The emails I get from subscribers and members of *The Religion Teacher* also share the same issues.

Here are the five conversations and emails I participate in again and again every day related to religious education:

The kids aren't coming to Mass on Sunday.

The parents are not acting as their children's primary catechists at home.

The students are not interested, excited, or engaged in class.

There's not a enough time to teach everything that needs to be taught.

There aren't enough practical resources to help teach complex theological concepts.

My heart breaks every time these issues come up. I try my best to console and offer bits of advice, but I think the solution is much bigger than quick-fix strategies and tactics.

We have to have a complete mindset shift.

We have to think differently about religious education in our parishes and Catholic schools.

This isn't something I could communicate in an email, or a conversation, a blog post, or even a workshop.

So, I wrote a book about it. It's called *To Heal, Proclaim, and Teach*.

Here is why I think this book is going to transform the way you think about religious education, catechesis, and evangelization.

THE OLD MINDSET

Here is a quick review of where we are at in terms of our Church's history. Recent popes have been calling us to carry out the "New Evangelization."

What is the New Evangelization?

It is a shift in focus. The "Old" Evangelization (if you will) was directed towards those who have not yet heard the Gospel. This is the work of missionaries. I think in terms of missionaries in the New World.

But the New Evangelization is directed towards people who are already baptized. These are the people who leave the Church or, if they are still here, are ready to leave soon.

The message is clear: we have to evangelize in our religious education programs.

We have inherited a model for religious education that is based on the "Old" Evangelization and Catechesis. The students sitting in front of you in class are simply not ready for catechesis alone. They also need to be evangelized.

And if you are not evangelizing young people today, the catechesis you provide will turn them away.

Let me say that in a different way: They will leave the Church if you teach doctrines without laying the essential groundwork of evangelization first.

We have to focus less on catechesis and more on evangelization.

First we evangelize, then we catechize.

A NEW MINDSET & THE NEW EVANGELIZATION IN RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

How can we radically transform the way we conduct our religious education programs?

Here are the ways in which we need to think differently. Each of them is inspired by [To Heal, Proclaim, and Teach: The Essential Guide to Ministry in Today's Catholic Church](#). I hope you will accept each of these new ideas and, if you need help implementing them, [go get the book](#) and read and share it with your colleagues.

We're on our way to a new horizon in Catholic religious education. Here is where we are going.

I hope that by time you finish reading this manifesto or the book, you will be able to say along with me in confidence each of the following statements.

"I AM NOT A TEACHER."

Yes, you read that right.

A catechist is not a teacher and in many ways a religion teacher is not a teacher.

What do I mean? Well, I think we have lost a full sense for what a teacher does for young people today. A teacher's full duty is not to just impart knowledge. They make a real, lasting impact on the lives of the young people they serve.

If we think of teachers as just people who teach then, no, we are not teachers.

I love hearing interviews with famous people who are asked to talk about someone who has made an impact on their lives. Frequently, they will talk about a teacher who believed in them when no one else would.

That is the standard by which our service must strive to achieve. Make a lasting impact on the lives of the students you serve.

They won't remember everything you teach. In all honesty, it doesn't matter if you get through your textbook.

I love this phrase: "Nobody cares what you know until they know that you care."

So, if you are not a teacher then what are you?

In my first book, [31 Days to Becoming a Better Religious Educator](#), I invite religious educators to reflect on the callings to be a disciple, servant, and leader in addition to being just a teacher. Each of these roles is inspired by the identity of Jesus Christ.

In [To Heal, Proclaim, and Teach](#), however, I look to what Jesus actual did in his ministry. He healed, he proclaimed, and he taught.

"Jesus went around to all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom, and curing every disease and illness."

Matthew 9:35

Let's unpack this a little bit in the next few statements.

"I WILL HAVE THE COURAGE TO HEAL MY STUDENTS."

You are a healer.

Jesus' healing miracles are always directed towards people who are outcasts. They are rejected by others. Jesus goes to them and heals them but, more importantly, he welcomes them into a loving community of disciples. They are healed and then they follow him.

Healing makes disciples.

We are all wounded by sin and separation from God and others. When we are healed from that wound, we find comfort in the unity with others.

How can you heal?

Let students know that you care. Let them know that someone believes in them.

Slow down and listen to your students.

When something goes wrong in their lives, be there for them. When they turn to you for help, do not hide behind the safe role of "teacher." Be willing to get emotionally involved.

I was always afraid to do this as a young teacher. I was self-conscious about my age and afraid to make personal connections with the kids. I hid behind a veil of professionalism. When they came to me with troubles at home or among friends, I hesitated to get involved.

What a shame. We are Christian disciples first. We are called, like Jesus, to be there for one another especially in times of need. Sometimes this causes us to get hurt because of our emotional attachments.

How else can you heal?

Prayer is a great way to practice healing. I'm not talking about miraculous or charismatic healing. No, you can heal without being a miracle-worker. Ask questions about the lives of your students and pray for them. I mean really pray for them. Worry about them. Show them that you care because we all know that you do. Practice that compassion in prayer.

"I WILL PROCLAIM THE GOOD NEWS IN EVERY LESSON."

You are a proclaimer.

You are not a preacher. You don't need to craft sermons to inspire young people. But you are a proclaimer.

Like Jesus, we proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom of God. How did Jesus proclaim the good news? He spoke in parables.

The first time Jesus told a parable, his disciples were confused. They asked him why he spoke in parables to the crowds. (*Important Note:* Jesus didn't speak in parables to his disciples. He spoke in parables to the crowds who were not his followers yet.)

His answer was essentially: Disciples already believe in God's love and follow Jesus. Those who are not disciples yet need to hear a message about the love of God. Speaking about the mysteries

of the faith plainly will not make any sense until they understand the essential truth about God's love—a love that is so far beyond comprehension.

In the earliest Church, they made the distinction between two modes of handing on the faith to people: *kerygma* and *didache*.

Kerygma, or “proclamation,” is the essential message of our faith. This is directed towards people who are not Christian disciples yet.

Didache, or “teaching,” is the passing on of the truths of the creed. It is given only to those who are baptized disciples. In the early Church, the didache was for catechumens who were becoming baptized and not for those outside of that process. In fact, the Creed and the Lord's Prayer wasn't given to catechumens until it was nearly Easter. That same process is symbolically followed today in the RCIA.

In the New Evangelization we are called not just to share the didache (even though we teach young people who are already baptized). We must also proclaim the kerygma, the first or primary proclamation.

I love the way Pope Francis described the kerygma in *Evangelii Gaudium* (EG, 164):

Jesus Christ loves you.

He died for you.

He is with you today.

These three truths must be on our lips as catechists in every lesson according to the Pope. No matter what doctrines we focus on in our lesson, if we fail relate them to these three truths then we have failed as a religious educator.

This is the good news we share: God is good—all the time! We know this because he loves us; he died for us; and he is with us today.

The best way I know of to make these points is to be Christ's witnesses.

As Paul VI wrote in *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, “Modern man listens more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if he does listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses.”

Share your [testimony](#). Be Christ's witnesses. Don't hide behind the safety of Church teachings.

“I SERVE BOTH STUDENTS AND THEIR PARENTS.”

You may only see the student in the classroom, but it is time to broaden your vision. You must reach the parents also.

Yes, many of them do not bring their kids to mass.

Yes, many of them do not reinforce what you are teaching at home.

Yes, many of them do not pray with their kids.

But, can we blame them?

Honestly, think about this:

They have not yet been evangelized!

And you (yes YOU!) may be the only person in the Church who can be that evangelizing presence in their lives.

You may be the only person in the Catholic Church that they interact with them in any meaningful way. This is a lot of responsibility but it is also a huge opportunity.

The next time you complain about the lack of support of the parents for the catechesis of the students in your class, stop and ask yourself:

Have I done everything I can to accompany these parents on their path towards discipleship?

If not, start to approach your relationship with these parents differently.

HEAL THE PARENTS

Establish a habit of constant communication with them. I'm not talking about newsletters and emails. I mean, get to know the parents. Ask about things that are going on at home at every chance you get. Ask if there is anything you can pray about for them. Invite them to join you at a fish fry night or pancake breakfast. Be there for them when they need you. They may not have anywhere else to go.

PROCLAIM GOOD NEWS TO THE PARENTS

Share your stories of testimony about the love of God. Invite parents to join you at Mass and share with them why Mass is so important to you. If your parish offers a retreat like CRHP and you've had a great experience on that retreat, invite the parents to go too and share what happened to you there. If you expect them to pray with their kids at home, share with them a story about how you encounter God's love when praying with your kids or praying as a kid with your parents growing up.

TEACH THE PARENTS

Finally, as a teacher, give your parents links to articles or suggest books to help them learn more about our Catholic faith. Share something you are reading about or learning. Ignite in them a passion to ask more questions about things they never knew growing up. Your goal should be to get them to say, "Why didn't anyone ever teach me this growing up?"

"I WILL GIVE STUDENTS MORE QUESTIONS THAN ANSWERS."

I know that many people, catechists especially, are afraid they don't know enough about the Church's teachings to be a teacher.

First of all, remember, you are not just a teacher. Your healing presence and proclamation of the personal love of God is much more important.

Not knowing it all is a huge blessing for a catechist.

Think about it. If you are not learning new things as you prepare for your lessons, then you are at a disadvantage. The more that your lessons are fresh and new in your heart and mind, the more it will light a spark of curiosity in the students you serve.

Curiosity is our goal.

We do not want to give students all the answers. We want to inspire them to ask more questions.

We want them to be so interested and engaged that they go home searching for more answers.

The moment we stop asking questions and think we have all the answers is the moment we cease to be a disciple of Christ. We must always seek to ask more questions and inspire students to ask questions too.

Unfortunately, our model for religious education is based on answers rather than questions.

We have to get out of this mindset. Our goal must be to get students to have questions. If they have all the answers, then they won't leave and learn from Christ. They won't become his disciples.

The Catechesis of the Good Shepherd is a good model for this. As a Montessori-based approach, the catechist lets the young people discover on their own. They are there to help, not direct. We need to do more of that at every age level.

Think of the great work of theology by Saint Thomas Aquinas. Aquinas's *Summa Theologiae* is essentially a tome of questions. The better questions he asks, the better answers he is able to provide.

The same must go for your classroom. At the end of the day look back at your lesson and ask yourself:

Did I spark in my students the desire to ask new and deeper questions?

Or, did I give students the impression that they learned everything they need to know to pass the test (or get Confirmed, or receive their First Communion, etc.)?

"I WILL ALWAYS RELATE WHAT I TEACH TO THE LIFE EXPERIENCES OF MY STUDENTS."

One of the biggest mistakes I see being made by religious educators today (as well as leaders of adult faith formation and the RCIA) is that they teach without relating anything to the concrete life experience of their students.

The *National Directory for Catechesis* describes two approaches to religious education: the inductive method and deductive method of catechesis. You must pick one or both approaches when you teach.

The deductive method begins with our teachings and relates them to life experience.

Imagine if you were teaching about Confirmation. First, you might teach about the meaning of the gifts of the Holy Spirit. Using the deductive method, you would then connect those gifts to the life experience of the students. You would have them think about a time when they used the gifts of wisdom or understanding or fortitude, etc.

The inductive method goes the opposite direction. You start with the students' life experiences and then relate them to the teaching.

Take **Baptism** for example. Rather than opening with an explanation of the symbols of Baptism, you start with a discussion about water. You ask students to tell you about how they use water. You get them to tell a story about a time when they went swimming or got their hands really dirty from playing in mud. You are very specific. You don't ask for broad statements. You ask for stories. Then, you relate those stories and memories to the Church's teaching about water in the Sacrament of Baptism.

Do you see how in each example, the teaching is anchored in a concrete experience of life? The students will be so much more interested and able to remember what you taught when this connection is made for them.

As human beings we cannot expect to memorize and recall only the facts about our faith. The faith must be related to our life experiences—our stories, memories, thoughts, and imagination.

"I WILL MAKE DISCIPLES, NOT THEOLOGIANs."

Here is an excerpt from *To Heal, Proclaim, and Teach* that I hope will drive home this point:

Let me be very clear about what I am fighting for. I envision a different kind of approach to catechesis in our Church today—one based on the broad history of the Church, not just the recent history of our Western industrialized society. We must provide catechetical opportunities that form disciples in love with Christ, not primitive theologians with certificates of completion. The Church calls us to make disciples, not theologians. Our goal must always be to provide opportunities for encounter with Christ and to help those who have experienced such encounters to understand and integrate those experiences into their everyday lives.

This paragraph essential sums up the mindset shift I hope you are beginning to see here. We cannot go on conducting our religious education programs as schools of theology.

We are *not* making theologians. We are making disciples.

To make disciples, we have to provide students with the opportunities to encounter Christ in classrooms, churches, and schools. That may mean offering opportunities for prayer. It may mean encouraging the formation of strong relationships between you and them and among themselves.

If you focus on making disciples, then evangelization must be at the core of what you do. Often, this means de-emphasizing catechesis in the way that you interact with your students.

And, again, what is kind of evangelization should we emphasize instead?

Like Jesus, we make disciples by healing our students. We show them that we are there for them. We go out of our way to make them feel welcomed and loved. We invite them to experience healing encounters with Christ themselves.

Like Jesus, we make disciples by proclaiming the good news to our students. We share our personal stories of encounters with Christ. We show them in everything we say and do that God loves them, he died for them, and he is with them today.

And finally, like Jesus, we make disciples by teaching our students how to be disciples. We spark and cultivate a curiosity to learn more about Christ. As the curiosity grows so does their ability to be Christ's disciples. At the same time, we commit to learning more ourselves and never lose our sense of wonder and awe of the mystery of our God.

A NEW HORIZON

Are you with me?

Let's set out on a journey to a new horizon for our religious education programs.

Let's commit to evangelization and not just catechesis.

I hope you will make the commitment to repeat with me the statements in this manifesto. I need help living them out. It is one thing to say them and another to do them. I need you to be there for me as I strive to live up to these statements. I promise to be there for you too.

To Heal, Proclaim, and Teach can help you, your colleagues, and your entire parish recommit to evangelization and not just catechesis. I believe this book is going to change the way we think about the work we do as Christ's disciples. I'm so excited for you to read it.

Go, now, and make disciples of all nations (but start right where you are in your religious education classrooms.)

Grace and peace,

Jared Dees



ABOUT JARED DEES

Jared Dees is the creator of *The Religion Teacher* and the author of *31 Days to Becoming a Better Religious Educator*, *To Heal, Proclaim, and Teach*, *Praying the Angelus*, and the new book, *Christ in the Classroom*.