

Empower Students to Be Family Evangelizers

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CATHOLIC SCHOOL EDUCATORS: heed the challenge! Extend your vocation response to include the family.

The vocation of the Catholic school teacher calls us to be catalysts that lead students to come to know, love, and serve God. In bygone times, home and school worked “hand in glove” to form a Christian character within the child. Some contemporary families are enthusiastic about pursuing that call. Many others, however, admit feelings of inferiority when it comes to being the spiritual formators of their children. They count on us to

fill in the gaps that they perceive exist. Those parents need us to evangelize them.

What? You might say, I am already on overload! Lesson plans that incorporate various learning styles and mediums,



differentiating instruction, student support meetings, mainstreaming, maintaining the student information system, extracurricular activities, faculty committee work, school duties (arrival, lunch, dismissal) . . . and the list goes on. Now you want me to add intentional evangelization of the family? I have no

more time! Well, the good news is that you do not need more time if you apply the adage, “work smarter, not harder.”

First, identify projects for liturgical seasons and other faith-formation topics that are part of your normal teaching curriculum. Then, develop interactive lessons that lead from the head (ideas) to the heart (affection, emotion). You may engage the students in the lesson with activities like becoming a character in the Christmas crib scene, defining the gifts and fruits of the Holy Spirit with modern examples, depicting timeline events of the Triduum, building a Jesse Tree, or choosing a favorite proverb or “Jesus one-liner” from the Bible. Within instructional class time, teach the students how to find Scripture citations and where to look for information on Church-related themes like feast days, novenas, litanies, women in the Bible, etc. Finally, work with the full class or in small groups to produce a single, unified class project. Display it in the classroom for the season.

Here is where we can engage the family with minimal added effort. For each seasonal project, create for the students a

sheet of directions so that the project can be replicated at home. Include a grading rubric. Assign students to repeat the lesson for their family, document family participation via photos, and convert the photos into a slideshow presentation. Have them each turn in one of the photos to you for you to make into a collage or a class PowerPoint to post to the classroom website. The finished product can yield a grade for religion, language (following directions), and technology.

With each project, family members will be learning or reviewing bits of Catholic spirituality that may, by grace, feed their souls and lead to a deepening relationship with Jesus. I call this “Backdoor Evangelizing.” The overt purpose is to help the student complete the assignment, which is to teach the topic to his or her family. The covert possibility is that parents and other family members may be touched by grace. Tidbits of our spiritual heritage can trigger an affective response that, in turn, may lead to spiritual awakening. At the very least, family members will refresh previously gained familiarity with our Catholic heritage—or experience it for the first time.

The goal of these family projects is to create a catalyst, a stepping stone, that takes family members on a journey from their heads to their hearts. The ultimate goal is to encounter Jesus. Therefore, each project needs to conclude with a personal application and an invitation to private prayer. Personal application includes questions like:

- What God-message is in this project for me or for our family?
- How am I like, or how could I be like, the character in the story?
- What difference would it make if I acted like this character when I am upset or stressed?
- Who can I name from my life that resembles this character’s virtue or this scriptural personality?
- What about this story (or activity, image, etc.) touches me?

After family sharing on the personal application question, the student imitates your way of wrapping up the session by inviting the members of the family to talk with Jesus about what thoughts this project stirred up in them. A period of silence follows.

Draw from the curriculum assigned to your grade level. Any topic has the potential for backyard evangelizing. The point is to facilitate the activity as a classroom exercise, and then for the student to imitate you and become the teacher of the family, engaging the family in replicating the lesson or project. By way of example, consider the usefulness of the following kinds of projects:

- Modern application for each decade of a rosary (Joyful, Sorrowful, Glorious, or Luminous). For example, Jesus Falls a Second Time: Open me to recognize the Simons in my life and to be a Simon for others.
- Each family member shares a favorite Gospel story.
- Collect 10 “Jesus said” sentences from Matthew’s Gospel. Have the family vote on one favorite.
- Read the Scripture story of one Old Testament woman. Summarize her story. What role did she play in salvation history? How can she influence your family today?
- Read the Scripture story of one Old Testament man. Summarize his story. What role did he play in salvation history? How can he influence your family today?
- Name and illustrate each of the precepts the Catholic Church.
- Feast of the Angels (October 2): Name, define/explain, and illustrate the nine choirs of angels, as well as the archangels Gabriel, Michael, and Raphael.

Punctuate the Liturgical Seasons

Breathe new life into our celebration of the liturgical seasons. Create opportunities for students and their families to enter a liturgical season with an attitude of personal investment.

Introduce a practice that begins with information but flows into formation and easily becomes an annual custom that the entire

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family anticipates with joy. Here I will highlight the practice of “choosing by lot” a “function card” that gives a role to imitate during the season, a scriptural character to tutor you through the season, a virtue to practice, a specific

grace to seek, etc. At one and the same time, the custom that I am proposing serves as both a corporate and a personal activity.

Choosing by lot is an ancient practice to decide something by chance rather than by deliberate choice. For example, blindly drawing the shortest straw, casting dice, or pulling a slip of paper from a container. The Acts of the Apostles relates how the 11 cast lots to choose a replacement for Judas, and “the lot fell upon Matthias” (Acts 1:26). “Function cards” serve the purpose of choosing by lot.

The ritual that I put before you includes five steps:

1. Prepare an environment where function cards are arranged face down
2. Introduce the liturgical practice and teach the elements of the practice
3. Explain the custom of choosing by lot
4. Pray to the Holy Spirit to determine which choice is best for the student at this moment in time
5. Invite the student to choose a Function Card by lot (ie., by random choice).

Cultivate student and family spirituality throughout the school year with choose-by-lot rituals for Ordinary Time, Advent,

Christmas, New Year, and Pentecost. For each of these five examples, facilitate a simple prayer ritual during class time for the students to blindly choose a function card. Then, lead a discussion in which each student will share either (1) how they can practice the “function,” (2) their observation of someone who lived that characteristic, or (3) how that particular “function” could have made a positive difference in an actual instance that day. Model this discussion so that the student can imitate it with their family. Throughout the season, refer to the practice.

Reproduce the individual function cards on a single sheet of paper that the student will take home for family use. Advise the students, when he or she teaches the lesson at home, to designate one night a week throughout the season for family members to share how they practiced the function that week or how they saw it practiced by someone. That someone could be from real life or fictional (from a story, TV show, comic strip, etc.). Devote a bulletin board in the classroom to displaying pictures of moments from the family assignment.

Be-Attitudes

The Gospel story of the eight beatitudes (Mt 5:1–12) is proclaimed annually on the feast of All Saints, November 1. Celebrate it by creating a function card for each of the beatitudes. Include the words of the beatitude followed by one or two ways that a student could practice the beatitude throughout the month. Either create the cards yourself or engage the class in creating them. Guide class reflection to elicit practical, age-appropriate applications of the practice(s) that the function card suggests.

An example of a beatitude function card might read:

- Beatitude: “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” (Matthew 5:3)
- (Older Child) Admit that I have needs; be open to change; realize that I am incomplete and in need of God’s grace.

- (Younger Child) Show your dependence on God by slowly reciting an “Our Father” once every day.

Advent Mentors

During the week between the solemnity of Christ the King and the first Sunday of Advent, guide students to reflect on the Gospel personalities that are part of the Advent and Christmas story: Zechariah, Elizabeth, Mary, Joseph, angels (both Gabriel and the angel choir), Herod, the Wise Men, and shepherds. Ask questions like: What are the character’s personality traits? How can those attitudes (positive or negative) be an influence for me?

Explain the word “mentor.” Illustrate how a Gospel mentor could guide a student in daily events if the student prayerfully asks questions like: How would you handle this? How can I be like you today? What ought I avoid in my actions today? What about your attitudes and behaviors should I imitate or avoid? Remember, even Herod has something to teach us!

For each character, read the Scriptures that give a glimpse into his/her personality or values. Elicit student summaries of the event and the character traits of the person. For each, agree on one focus that can serve as a practice during Advent. Then create function cards. Include the character’s name, his/her scriptural references, and a practice (practical application related to the character).

For example:

Zechariah (Zachary/Zacharias)

(Luke 1:5–24, 61–66, 67–79)

PRACTICE: Listen well instead of speaking.

Serving in the Court of the Infant King

Ancient cultures and medieval Europe were governed by kings who lived in royal palaces. Privileged people, attendants, and slaves comprised the “court” and served various functions. In the 17th century, St. Alphonsus Liguori introduced a spiritual

practice in which the Nativity scene mirrored the court scenario. He viewed Jesus as king on a throne-bed of straw, and serving in his court were the Gospel figures who were a part of the Nativity story (star, stable, crib, straw, Mary, Joseph, animals, angels, shepherds, Wise Men, and Herod).

In the week preceding Christmas vacation, discuss each figure. What part did the figure play in the Nativity story? What life lesson or virtue might the student practice during the Christmas season as that member of the Court of the Infant King? For each of the ten figures, make a function card indicating how that character served and giving a prayer for grace to apply that virtue in daily life throughout Christmas week. For example:

Straw

Prayer: Father, like the straw that became your Son's first resting place, may I be a source of welcome to Jesus and to all whom I meet.

Practice: Jesus, let my acts of charity be the straw that supports others.

Choreograph a prayer ritual wherein the Nativity Gospel story is proclaimed aloud. During the reading, arrange for the students to build the Christmas crèche scene. For instance, when the stable is mentioned, the student(s) who randomly chose the "stable" function card place the stable on the table. All students who hold the card then pray aloud the words from the function card. Continue the reading and pause at the next court function for the student(s) to place the figurine and pray aloud from their cards.

Smarter, Not Harder

At the onset of this article, I advised you to work smarter, not harder. I caution that there is no need to "reinvent the wheel" and spend hours of time to prepare for these liturgical season rituals. Similar ideas are included in teacher manuals. I am a firm believer in the concept "divide and conquer." Join with other teachers.

Divvy up the themes and then swap ideas. Identify parents in your program who would be willing and able to take your lead suggestion and develop it. Trust that you have what it takes to evangelize the family within the time parameters available to you. Recall often that, at his Ascension, Jesus promised to be with us all days, to the end of the world. You are one very significant way that Jesus is keeping his promise!

Sr. Patricia McCormack, IHM, EdD, is an international formation-education consultant, public speaker, and author. Her work blends Catholic spirituality, psychology, and wisdom gathered from parents, teachers, and students. Her book Empowering the Parking Lot Parent: A Catechist's Guide to Coaching Family Spirituality (Twenty-Third Publications, 2021) provides explanations, handouts, and function cards for each of the liturgical season rituals suggested in this article. It is a rich resource for evangelizing the family. It includes 27 reproducible handouts for families. Find more resources and information at www.ParentTeacherSupport.org.

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