



The Development and Implementation of Characteristic Seven

Characteristic Seven of the Evangelizing Catholic School process states: *An evangelizing Catholic school is one that makes known the Good News of Jesus to others and invites school families into the Catholic faith community, especially those who are inactive or those who are un-churched.*

Characteristic Five and Characteristic Seven are closely linked. Both will complement each other as they both deal with the needs of those families who are currently enrolled in the school. Thus, they should be used in conjunction, one with the other, to make certain that as many of the needs of the families of your students are met to the greatest degree possible.

It's difficult to reach out to families without violating their privacy and entering into areas where your help is not wanted or needed. Great sensitivity is needed in this endeavor and exercising prudence and compassion as you attempt to offer assistance to families is in order.

A lot of information can be gathered from permanent records and registration forms to help you decipher whether or not there is a need for some sort of program or activity that will or may address some of the problem areas of your families without calling attention to the individual families that may need assistance. In this way, respect for privacy can be shown, situations can be addressed and problems possibly solved without anyone feeling intruded upon or being singled out.

This follow-up is a series of activities, processes and ideas on how to reach out to these families in a compassionate and non-threatening way to help them come to a deeper and more intimate relationship with Jesus Christ and re-establish their relationship with the Catholic Church. Undoubtedly as you attempt to help them re-connect with Jesus and His Church, other families within your school community, both those who need assistance and those who wish to help, will also be strengthened in their union with Christ and the Church.

The essential ingredient in carrying out this characteristic is that utilizing the various groups and committees in the parish is essential. You cannot, nor should you, attempt to respond to the expressed and hidden needs of the families of your school community, without additional input and assistance from your parish priests and the parish faith community.

Hopefully, this process will assist you as you continue your journey in becoming a better evangelizing Catholic school.

*As Catholics, it is still our desire to invite people into the true Church
which possesses the fullness of God's revelation
The evangelizer and the evangelizing community, not separate from the Church
but in union with the Church, seek to lead others
to accept the Person of Jesus and His Way.*

CHARACTERISTIC SEVEN

An evangelizing school is one that makes known the Good News of Jesus to others and invites school families into the Catholic faith community, especially those who are inactive or those who are un-churched.

The intent of this development is to give you assistance in opening wide the doors to your school (and your parish) so that your school families know that your school/parish is an evangelizing one; one that is compassionate, reaches out to them in need, and genuinely cares about them as children of God while respecting their privacy.

To that end, this follow-up will center on various methods, some formal and others informal, that will assist you, in union with the parish family, to reach out to the inactive and un-churched in achieving that goal by:

- raising the awareness of your faculty to gently and lovingly invite families to full and active participation in the Church;
- always respecting the conscience and experiences of others;
- being aware that faith is a gift from God and is offered to all;
- being aware that faith is accepted in God's time according to the circumstances of those invited to faith.

THINGS TO KEEP IN MIND

- An immediate response is probably not desired nor anticipated.
- Immediate reaction will often make people who have divulged some inner yearning or desire to back off.
- A climate of trust must be built between the individuals and the school / parish.
- A problem or situation surfaced should probably not be addressed directly but indirectly, couching it inside a gathering or series of gatherings with another expressed intent.
- Situations or problems did not occur overnight and therefore will not disappear overnight; they will take time to address and lots of time to possibly solve.

Much is already being done within your local schools and parishes to address the needs of all parishioners and so, in time, the problems and situations that have become evident can be addressed by already existing groups.

Remember that the main intent is to help families to be re-membered with the Catholic Church in a compassionate and caring manner, respecting their privacy and their own faith journey.

REGISTRATION TIME

Registration time is a perfect opportunity to introduce new school families to your school. It might require a little adjustment to how you handle registrations for new families (especially if you have open registration over a prolonged period of time instead of on one particular afternoon).

- No matter how you schedule new families for registration, you could begin by bringing them all together as a group and introducing them to the importance of Jesus in your school community.
 - This should include prayer;
 - A presentation on the various witness statements from the Administrator Handbook.
 - Witness Statement for Those Serving in Catholic Education.
 - Witness Statement for Those Whose Children Attend Catholic Education Programs.
 - Witness Statement: Called To Be Catholic – For Students who attend Catholic Schools and parish Schools of Religion.
 - A brief presentation of “commitment” on the part of parents and students along with the commitment of the school / parish to the parents;
 - It’s at this point that you could insert “services” or opportunities that are made available to parents to help them become more a part of the faith community.
 - If you have your calendar already printed then you could give them the schedule of “what’s going to be happening” during the year.
 - A tour of the school;
 - Here you could take them through the school paying special attention to some of the things that you’ve implemented from the follow-up which accompanies this one and focuses on environment to make all feel welcome.

REPORT CARD NIGHTS

Report card nights vary from school to school but many schools set aside 10 minutes for the parents of their students to come in and speak with the teacher of their child. There is usually so much to discuss, from subject matter to discipline, that there is really very little time to really do any justice to any discussion.

An idea to consider would be an evening that begins with a group of parents coming together for an opening presentation by the principal or pastor prior to going to individual rooms to discuss their child’s progress.

- If your school is large you could divide the same amount of time devoted to individual conferences into sub-sections, having one group of parents come at a designated time prior to going for individual conferences; then conducting the same presentation at a later time for an entirely different group of parents, followed by individual conferences, etc.

- The general conference might be to re-enforce a guideline that is not being followed or something new that needs explanation; but more often the time could focus on some aspect of Catholic identity or Catholic theology that could be explained and / or discussed.
- This type of gathering would allow the principal and / or pastor to address some areas of family life that might be affecting the families of your students or areas where you have discerned a number of families are in need of updating. In this way, individual families in need of assistance would not be singled out as having a particular problem and the presentation could be generic enough in nature that it would be informative and educational for everyone in attendance.

FAMILY MEDIA NIGHTS

Here's an opportunity to reach out to all families in the parish but especially to school families in order to give them the opportunity to come together as a faith community and to interact with others. While everyone is invited, special invitations could be sent to those families you know are inactive or un-churched without singling them out as non-participating families in parish or school life.

- Choose a film (there are many of them available through the Archdiocesan Religious Education Media Center) on some generic topic pertaining to faith.
- Advertise this event as a family night (you might, depending upon the film chosen, select another one more suitable to children but with the same theme) through your newsletter and through the Sunday bulletin.
- Start the evening off with a short presentation on the subject matter to be covered in the film.
- Even if you have to show the film on two different evenings because of its length, end the evening with some sort of discussion (either table or group) and close with a "summation" by the person who gave the introduction.

THEOLOGICAL UPDATES

From the latest encyclicals of Pope Francis to current issues in the Church especially as they affect the Archdiocese of Saint Louis an evening devoted to issues in the Church will help to initiate families into the Church and will increase their knowledge of the latest in Church teaching and thinking.

There are countless people available throughout the archdiocese, some priests or teachers and some lay people who teach in Paul VI or at the archdiocesan seminary who can be invited to address a theological topic.

- A possible topic would be on Marriage and Family life conducted by the pastor or someone from the Archdiocesan Marriage Tribunal.
 - Included in this presentation could be mention of those who are in need of an annulment or family counseling without making anyone in attendance to feel that they are being singled out or leave feeling that they have just been reprimanded.
 - It would be very important in this instance to have someone who is very knowledgeable about marriage and family life who can offer resources to those in attendance if they have the need and the desire to follow-up on any of the subjects mentioned, especially annulments.
- The Commandments could be another topic; especially if you are dealing with school families who are inactive in the practice of their faith.
 - The generic theme could be on how to keep the Sabbath holy.
 - The presentation could center on statistics of Sunday Mass attendance, stewardship, etc.
 - Ideally, however, the theme would give practical ideas of how to keep Sunday holy and how parents should make it a family day.

The list of possible topics is unlimited and each of these topics could be presented in such a way that families could be tuned in to the expectations of the faith community and the part they have to play in it without making anyone uncomfortable.

AFTERNOON “TEAS” OR “COFFEES”

On occasion, you might schedule an afternoon gathering (or possibly a Saturday morning brunch) with some of the newer members of your school community for a social gathering. This would be an excellent way to socialize the newer members into the faith community of the school.

- In addition to inviting the newer members you could add a few of your more established members of the school community.
 - Meet with the members of this group who have had children in the school for some time but have become “anchors” for you; those who are always able to be counted on.
 - Tell them your purpose and ask them to keep the conversation moving with those who are new.
 - Ask them to share some of their stories (only the good ones) about belonging to this particular faith community.

- If you do it early enough after they have registered, you might even ask the established members of your school community if they would invite the new families to attend Mass with them on a particular Sunday and then ask them to introduce them to other members.
- Additionally, the established members could explain to them the concept of “room mothers” or the parent organization and the like.
- Or, if your schedule just does not permit it, you might ask some of the established members of your school to conduct these types of gathering with others in the neighborhood as some type of “welcome school wagon” committee.
 - It would still be of importance for you to attempt to attend at least a portion of this gathering if at all possible.

PARENT / FAMILY MENTORS

Many parishes, when new families register, assign them an established parish family as mentors. One family helps the other to become acclimated to the various ministries of the parish. You could take your cue from this type of ministry and assign each new family a school mentor.

- It would be the responsibility of the host family to make contact with the newly registered family (with advanced planning you could have a member of the host family “in the wings” after the person registers and facilitate the first meeting of the two).
- The host family could use their own imagination as to what would make the new family more comfortable as they came into the school community.
 - This could be a dinner some evening for the entire families of both.
 - It could mean a Sunday barbeque.
 - Or just an evening of going out for ice cream.
- The goal would be the same no matter the venue: to help new families to feel at home and to give them an idea about the mission of Catholic Education.

The various activities listed above are by no means the only activities that you could do to minister to the needs of the new members of your school community. Many other ideas are already in place and many other ideas have not even been mentioned. But the ideas above are intended to give you a fresh perspective as to how your school community welcomes new members of the school faith community. In a real sense it continues the theme of “welcoming,” but it goes much deeper than that as it seeks to marinate new school families into the faith community.

PARISH PROGRAMS

Again, respecting the privacy of new families can be a challenge. The journey to becoming re-connected or re-membered into the church may be a lengthy process and one that requires great sensitivity on your part. Helping a family re-enter the faith community might require moving them easily and gently through some of the activities and gatherings that the school provides already mentioned above.

The various programs or activities that follow could already be in place with the parish structure. So these are not intended for you to duplicate but to coordinate with the leaders of these various ministries so that you can funnel or guide the newer members of your school community, who may be in need of assistance, to them.

RITE OF CHRISTIAN INITIATION OF ADULTS

The Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (often abbreviated as RCIA) is the process through which adults, if so desired, are gradually introduced to the Roman Catholic faith and her way of life. It is a process and not a program and therefore invites interested adults to enter the program and to proceed at their own pace. It is a communal process that involves a number of stages of which the culmination is full membership in the Catholic Church at the Easter Vigil.

In addition, the process accepts those who have already been baptized in the Catholic faith but did not receive sacraments of Reconciliation, Eucharist and / or Confirmation.

Most parishes, or grouping of parishes, have an RCIA process in place already so it is not necessary to reinvent the wheel but to “tap into” a process that is already in existence. As you glean information from association with your new families you will have a better feel for how to direct them into this process with sensitivity and compassion.

CATHOLICS RETURNING HOME

Throughout the last thirty years or so, a program was put into place called by different names at various times: “Re-membering Church,” “At Home with the Church,” and “Catholics Returning Home” are but a few of the titles given to this effort over the years.

Catholics Returning Home is a series of sessions intended to provide updated information on Catholicism in a non-threatening and supportive group format. It is similar to the format of the RCIA.

Through this process, adult Catholics who have fallen out of the practice of their faith come together to share stories, to be updated on changes in the Church to gain deeper insight and renewed appreciation for the celebration of the Eucharist and the other sacraments, and to discuss the basic tenets of our faith.

It is not a class but a series of gatherings with the clear intent to help people come to a deeper and more complete understanding of the Church and her teachings so that they can begin again their journey of faith as they continue the practice of membership in the Catholic Church.

THE UN-CHURCHED

From time to time you will discover through conversation and other means that some of your school families have no church affiliation. As Catholics, we believe that the Catholic Church has the fullness of God's revelation and our desire should be to invite those who are un-churched to explore the richness and the beauty of the Catholic Church and her teachings.

To assist those who are un-churched and wish to explore the richness of the Church and her traditions, there are various programs or processes that explain:

- the various doctrines and teachings of the Church;
- that gives them an understanding of exactly what it is the Church teaches;
- that gives them knowledge of our beliefs;
- and, why we believe.

It might be possible to refer them to the program mentioned above, *Catholics Returning Home* or to lectures or presentations on the Creed of the Catholic Church or other adult education offerings at the parish or in the local community that would help them come to understand the Roman Catholic Church and her teachings.

If you encounter school families who are un-churched and who express an interest in the Catholic Church you should always seek advice and direction from the Pastor of your parish.

MINISTRY TO THE SEPARATED, WIDOWED OR DIVORCED

The loss of a relationship through death or divorce can be one of life's most traumatic times. As stated on the website of the Office of Apostolic Services, Office of Laity and Family Life, "*The Office of Laity and Family Life recognizes that rebuilding one's life after such a loss can be emotionally, physically and spiritually draining. It is in keeping with the U.S. Bishops' 1994 message to families...that we offer support through a variety of spiritual and educational resources...*"

Some of those resources center on the topic of those in need of annulments, support groups led by a trained facilitator for those recently divorced or separated, or those who have experienced loss through death which are offered through the Office of Laity and Family Life. An example of these resources is: "Catholic's Divorce Survival Guide" – a 12 week course of DVD presentation and small group sharing with a trained facilitator.

Questions in these areas should be referred to your pastor or to other agencies in the Archdiocese of Saint Louis that specialize in handling these situations. If computer access is available by those who have questions and / or concerns, you can refer them to the Archdiocesan website at www.archstl.org or to the website for the Office of Laity and Family Life at www.archstl.org/laityandfamilylife.