

“The truth and beauty of Catholicism are best imparted not by a textbook but by a living witness. Lenny DeLorenzo offers in this beautiful book a reorientation of the way we think about and implement catechesis and faith formation. This book is a game-changer both in its unique, coherent presentation of the faith and in its provocative and compelling approach to forming others in the faith. This is a book that should be in the hands of every parent, pastor, catechist, and teacher.”

—Most Reverend Kevin C. Rhoades
Bishop of Fort Wayne-South Bend

“The Catholic faith, and the person of Jesus Christ who reveals it, is ever new and has the power to fascinate the mind as it sets a heart on fire with excitement about the promise of a life greater than we can imagine. DeLorenzo brings to life the striking beauty of the story of Jesus Christ and offers a method that empowers catechists to share this life-changing truth with young people. This book, firmly based in the principles of the new Directory of Catechesis, has the power to transform an ordinary confirmation program into a life-changing experience, because it helps the catechist become a witness to the transforming power of the Gospel.”

—Most Reverend Andrew H. Cozzens, STD, DD
Auxiliary Bishop of St. Paul and Minneapolis

“Leonard DeLorenzo’s new book *Turn to the Lord* is an encounter with the Body of Christ! I have often found myself to be without words when trying to explain the fullness of the Catholic faith. Describing beliefs or practices by themselves feels like scattering puzzle pieces. This book will be appreciated by catechists, youth ministers, parents, and anyone who loves the faith and longs to share it. By describing the themes of faith, DeLorenzo paints the big picture of what it means to be Catholic, and to be loved by our generous God.”

—Tom East, Director of the Center for Ministry Development and
Project Coordinator for the Certificate in Youth Ministry
Studies Program

“Dr. Leonard DeLorenzo’s book articulates a comprehensive approach to faith formation. From exhaustive catechetical content to real life conversational quips, this book is a delight. DeLorenzo possesses a quality of simple explanation of deep ideas found in C. S. Lewis and N. T. Wright. The book reads like an inspiring essay but sticks with you like an excellent keynote speech. It will become a tool on the shelf of anyone in faith formation and a gift for all who pursue a deeper understanding of Catholicism.”

—Doug Tooke
Vice President of Mission, ODB Films

“*Turn to The Lord* by Dr. DeLorenzo is a refreshing look at the catechism and our youth. Not only does the text provide important elements of the Catholic faith, but also provides a framework in which to share our rich faith with children and teens. Dr. DeLorenzo takes a modern approach to reach and teach today’s generation of students.”

—Leslie Lipovski, PhD
Assistant Superintendent, Catholic Diocese of Arlington, Virginia

“I am grateful for Leonard DeLorenzo’s new book *Turn to the Lord*, which offers parents and catechists both a theological vision of the life of the Christian and a process for proposing it to others. It will be a great resource in our efforts to re-envision an evangelizing catechesis in our day.”

—Katie Dawson, Director of Parish Evangelization and Faith Formation,
Diocese of Orange

Turn to the Lord

Forming Disciples for Lifelong Conversion

Leonard J. DeLorenzo



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To the families of St. Joseph Catholic Church
in South Bend, Indiana,
and especially to the young people
in our first “Catholic Formation Group”

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Preface

The Whole Thing

Catholicism is about the whole but we often pass it on as a bunch of pieces. What is missing in much of religious instruction, faith formation, and sacramental preparation is the coherence factor. We get bogged down in the tedium of “topics,” while the coherence factor has to do with the beauty of the whole. Losing the coherence factor is like studying all the different rules of baseball without learning to appreciate the game itself. Or again, it is like focusing so much on each individual amendment to the Constitution that we fail to see the genius of the document as a whole.

I am interested in the genius of Catholicism as a whole, without sacrificing attention to particular things within that whole.

In this book, I attempt to present the whole while offering instruction about important parts of the Catholic faith. This does not mean that I attempt to present everything about Catholicism in this book. Instead, I want to help others encounter the impact the person of Christ makes on those he claims as his own. I want us to see how being claimed by Christ orders us to communion with God and each other. I want us to discern why the discovery of God leads to the discovery of ourselves, as we are created and called to be.

I am not content to just offer a presentation; I also want to help others present Catholicism in a compelling and substantive way. That is why there are two parts to this book. In the first part, I offer the presentation myself. In the second part, I provide guidance for presenting Catholicism to others.

Formed in Community

Where did this idea come from? It came from practice, in a community. The community was my home parish and, within that community, a

community of families who wanted to prepare their young people for the sacrament of confirmation in a new and better way. We did not care for using textbooks for religious formation, so we did not use them. Textbooks present topics and are often deficient in presenting beauty or captivating interest. We wanted to form our young in a living faith that is beautiful.

I developed the content for what we called our “Catholic Formation Group,” drawing principally from Scripture and the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, which stand together as the primary texts for this approach to formation. As a theology professor who has both taught in the classroom and crafted pastoral programming for nearly two decades, I was consistently attentive to forming and not just informing our young people. I thought about how to inculcate habits and not just impart knowledge. I sought to lead them into prayer and not into boredom. I was concerned with the whole.

My approach is to move both narratively and biblically. I begin with the narrative of St. Paul, in multiple parts, whose conversion and transformation into what I describe as “a source of goodness” leads us to the person of Christ. The contemplation of who Christ is serves as the centerpiece of the whole, and leads to the practice of learning how to wait for the Lord. If we were to think of the content of this book as a full-year curriculum, the journey from Paul to Christ and into Advent would be the first semester.

The second semester, then, concerns the study of creation in order to discover who and what human beings are created to be. From there, I give an account of sin and the effects of sin. We explore how recovery from sin takes place through the Spirit, and how we grow in virtue to become capable of being who Christ frees us to be. In the process, we touch on the gifts of the Holy Spirit and why they matter, the meaning of the body and of the sexes, the significance of chastity as a virtue, the conditions of discipleship, and the mystery of the sacraments as building up the Body of Christ.

That might sound like a bunch of different stuff, but it is all presented together upon one keynote. The keynote in all of this is communion, because communion is at the heart of Catholicism, because Christ is at the heart of the faith. Christ brings us into communion with God and unity with one another—that’s the Catholic whole. By the end of this exploration, then, people will certainly know more things while also becoming practiced in a Catholic view of life, which is not

something you can simply be told about; you have to be persuaded by it and ultimately immersed in it.

Two Parts of the Whole

The first part of this book is me writing to you directly (“Power and Wisdom”). I present everything I just mentioned to you. If you are a parent interested in enriching the formation of your children, I think the best resource is actually you yourself—so I want to help enrich you in your understanding of and confidence in the Catholic faith. The same is true if you are a catechist or teacher. Textbooks are often used *in place of* the catechist, parent, or teacher. I don’t want to erase you. I want to further equip and empower you. I hope the first part of the book, where I present this material to you directly, will do just that.

The second part of the book, then, is me sharing how I have taught this same material to those involved in faith formation. The primary group that I lead is the group of young people preparing for confirmation. I believe this is easily adaptable (perhaps without much adaptation at all) for the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA) or even for adult faith enrichment.

We need more leaders in the Church, people who will be able to evangelize and educate in their parishes and homes, as well as in schools. Not everyone is a trained teacher or catechist, and not everyone has a degree in theology or training as a professional minister. So I want to provide a resource to help you become the teacher and catechist your community needs. The second part of this book—dedicated to “Reflection and Practice”—guides you as you lead others.

The two parts of this book (“Power and Wisdom” and “Reflection and Practice”) are related to each other in the following way: Each chapter of part 1 presents a facet of Catholicism while the corresponding chapter in part 2 offers guidance in how to teach this to others. This means, therefore, that chapter 1 of part 1 corresponds to chapter 1 of part 2, chapter 2 to chapter 2, and so forth.

Part 1 (“Power and Wisdom”) is composed of twenty-five chapters and an epilogue. Each of those chapters has a corresponding chapter in part 2. The epilogue of part 1, however, does not have a corresponding chapter in part 2. Instead, part 2 begins with its own introduction (“The Conditions of Formation”). In the online resource available at leonardjdelorenzo.com/turn-resources you will find the prayers used

throughout this book (the Angelus, prayers of specific saints, etc.), testimonies from parents in my parish responding to the question of “Who is Jesus for me?” and other material relating especially to the reflection and practice. Everything in the online resource is referenced in part 2.

The two-part volume you are presently reading is intended primarily for leaders of faith formation groups, especially leaders preparing others for the Sacraments of Initiation. You may well be a director of religious education or a trained and experienced catechist, but you may also be a parent, sponsor, or volunteer who is taking on a new leading role, as was the case with me when I directed the formation group for my eldest son and his peers as they prepared for confirmation. Part 2 of this book is especially relevant for you in a way that it would not be for others who are not leading or co-leading a group. Part 1, however, is relevant for more than just group leaders, since part 1 presents a coherent, compelling, and stimulating introduction to or re-immersion in the beauty of the Catholic faith.

Recognizing that part 1 would be valuable on its own and of benefit to a wider circle of people than just the leaders of faith formation groups, we decided to create a shorter book that only contains part 1. That one-part book appears under the title *Turn to the Lord: An Invitation to Lifelong Conversion*. If you are leading a group of young people in preparation for confirmation, the one-part book will be invaluable to parents of all the students involved in the group as it will enable them to contemplate the same things that their children are contemplating, but in a way appropriate to them. The same is true of sponsors for confirmation candidates, and of spouses, family members, and godparents of RCIA candidates. The one-part book is also well-suited for stand-alone adult or young adult faith sharing groups, as well as for anyone who desires to learn more about and pray more deeply into their Catholic faith.

Especially in a time when we have all become keenly aware of the interruption to the normal rhythm of life that something like a global pandemic imposes upon us, this approach to faith formation offers exceptional flexibility and fosters resiliency. The more we invest in parents, sponsors, family members, and mentors, the more easily we will be able to pivot to alternative forms of instruction, faith formation experiences, and sacramental preparation. It is therefore doubly

wise for an entire community to invest in this approach, so that even those parents or sponsors who are not directly leading a Catholic Formation Group will read the one-part book I discussed above and thus be prepared to pivot to temporary or more permanent leadership responsibilities should unforeseen circumstances arise. Even if times like that never come for a particular group, the tremendous benefit of a whole community engaging this material together is that our parishes, schools, and family homes will foster a culture of formation through the studious and prayer-filled attentiveness of a great many disciples.

All of this moves us beyond the consumeristic approach to ministry and education, where the parish or the school (and the ministers and teachers therein) are solely relied upon to provide the instruction and formation for emerging disciples. Instead, I want to help ministers and teachers to draw forth the leadership of a great many. In the Church, we do not leave evangelization and catechesis to “the professionals,” because each of us, by virtue of our baptism and as sealed through our confirmation, is directly and personally responsible for the mission of Jesus Christ.

I end this general introduction with a word of hope. We know more people are leaving the Catholic Church every year than coming into it. We know that religion in general is in decline. We know that the fastest growing religious group in the United States and elsewhere in the world is the group known as the “Nones,” or the religiously unaffiliated. This is all serious stuff. But I am hopeful, because I believe in God the Father Almighty, Jesus Christ his only Son our Lord, and the Holy Spirit, the giver of life. I believe in the Catholic Church. I believe that we do need new strategies and approaches to passing on and forming people in the faith. I believe that we need to commit ourselves more seriously to what matters most. I believe we have to sacrifice more. But I believe we can and will, by the grace of God.

And I believe this book will help.



Part One

Power and Wisdom

chapter one

The Way

God's Plan

“God, infinitely perfect and blessed in himself, in a plan of sheer goodness freely created man to make him share in his own blessed life.”¹ That is the first line of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, and it is a stunning claim. It means that the point of everything—from beginning to end—is for God’s life to become our life.

To share in God’s life means becoming what we were not. “In his Son and through him, [God] invites men to become, in the Holy Spirit, his adopted children and thus heirs of his blessed life” (CCC 1). Those claimed in and through Christ receive a share in the inheritance that properly belongs to Christ alone: his blessed life in communion with the Father. By the Holy Spirit, we receive this communion as a gift, with the mission to share this gift of communion with others. Christ is the gift of God’s life for us; in him, God’s life becomes our life.

There is drama in God’s life becoming our life. It is a drama that reaches to the depths of each person and stretches across the connections between us. It has to do with everything we are and, even more, everything we are called to become. God’s life is given to us as a gift, but our task is to grow into the gift we receive. And we are responsible for one another toward that end.

1. *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (hereafter, CCC), 2nd ed. (United States Catholic Conference—Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1997), 1.

Life Begins at Baptism

The life we receive in Christ is no half measure: it is complete, full, and everlasting. Through the ministry of the Church, Christ confers his life upon us through the sacraments, beginning with the sacrament of baptism. In this sacrament, Christ works through his Church to initiate us not merely into a set of teachings or precepts, but into his *life*. The Rite of Baptism performs the initiation the sacrament effects, so that by paying attention to the rite, we learn precisely what the beginning of this new life entails—namely, renunciation, profession, and immersion.

In order to be freed for life in Christ, a person must first be separated from the old life—the life of sin, bound by death. This separation is performed in a minor exorcism, in and through renunciation of this old way.² The act of renunciation is typically made in response to three questions, with either the person being baptized or the godparents on his or her behalf offering the responses:

[Celebrant:] Do you renounce Satan?

[Parents and godparents:] I do.

And all his works?

I do.

And all his empty show?

I do.

God's life cannot be mingled with the way that leads to death. There is no double life; again, no half measure. You cannot be truthful and a liar at the same time; you cannot be both dead and alive. The old way must be driven out before the new way begins.

Second, and following the renunciation, comes the profession of faith. As if having breathed out old, stale air from one's lungs, the new, fresh air can now be taken in. Just so, the three "no" responses of the renunciation are now matched by three "yes" responses:

[Celebrant:] Do you believe in God, the Father almighty, Creator of heaven and earth?

[Parents and godparents:] I do.

2. See CCC 1237.

Do you believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord, who was born of the Virgin Mary, suffered death and was buried, rose again from the dead and is seated at the right hand of the Father?

I do.

Do you believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy Catholic Church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and life everlasting?

I do.

Third and finally, the person is now baptized into *this* faith, which has just been professed. The baptism effects, at one and the same time, a separation (from sin) and an initiation (into Christ's life). This third moment is the one that contains the other two and makes them true: the person is immersed into the baptismal waters and into the name of the triune God—the person is immersed in a *life*:

[Celebrant:] I baptize you in the name of the Father [immersion no. 1], and of the Son [immersion no. 2], and of the Holy Spirit [immersion no. 3].

In the sacrament of baptism, *God* accomplishes what he set out to do: he brings us into *his* life, in Christ by the Holy Spirit. Our renunciation of sin and our profession of faith are two sides of our consent to what God is doing in the sacrament. In every baptism, God gives us a share in his life and we receive this gift.

The Way of Life

Since this gift is not some mere *thing* but indeed a *life*, Christians are thus initiated into a way of being to which we must grow accustomed. It is a way of life that must be practiced. In fact, in the early Church, before they were called “Christians,”³ the followers of the risen Christ were known according to their way of life. As such, “Christianity” was simply called “the Way.”

We can see the distinctive marks of this “Way” of life in the Acts of the Apostles, where St. Luke gives an account of the earliest Christian community in Jerusalem:

3. See Acts 11:26 for a note about the beginning of the name “Christians.”

They devoted themselves to the teaching of the apostles and to the communal life, to the breaking of the bread, and to the prayers. Awe came upon everyone, and many wonders and signs were done through the apostles. All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their property and possessions and divide them among all according to each one's need. Every day they devoted themselves to meeting together in the temple area and to breaking bread in their homes. They ate their meals with exultation and sincerity of heart, praising God and enjoying favor with all the people. And every day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved. (Acts 2:42-47, NABRE)

As we can see, the life of the early Christian community was built on four pillars. First, they studied the teaching of the apostles—that is, they dedicated themselves to the Gospel of Jesus Christ handed down to them. Second, they shared all things in common, including serving the needs of the neediest—that is, they gave alms and practiced charity. Third, they broke bread together in their homes—this, no doubt, is the beginning of eucharistic fellowship. And fourth, they committed themselves to the rule of prayer.⁴ Upon these four pillars, the first Christians grew into the life they had received.

Notice how this scriptural passage concludes: “And every day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.” In other words, as they lived “the Way,” these early Christians contributed not just to their own well-being but also to the well-being of others. By conforming their lives to the good gift they had received, they became a *source of goodness for others*.

In this we can see something of the connection between baptism and confirmation. The latter is the sacramental mission to give what you have received. The fully initiated and mature Christian is more than one who has been converted through the love of God; in Christ and by the Holy Spirit, Christians become a source of the good gift they have received. This is the great dignity of the Christian: to share

4. It is worth noting that these four pillars, as I have called them, are visible as the four pillars of the *Catechism* itself: 1. The Profession of Faith (the teaching of the apostles), 2. The Celebration of the Christian Mystery (the breaking of bread), 3. Life in Christ (the communal life), and 4. Christian Prayer (the prayers).

in God's life so fully as to become an agent of communicating that life to others.

Formation for Life

The Christian life is a lifelong practice in saying "Yes" to the life of God, given to us in Christ. That "Yes" begins in baptism and leads all the way to the communion of saints, in whom the Body of Christ is made complete. Being further confirmed and strengthened in this "Yes" requires formation. Those four dimensions of "the Way" enumerated in Acts 2 are the basic dimensions of Christian formation: study of the faith, practices of charity, eucharistic fellowship, and regular prayer. Whether as preparation for the sacrament of confirmation or through RCIA, or as a way of pursuing a deeper commitment to the mature Christian life, the regular practice of this "Way" makes us receptive to God's gift and responsive to the mission of the Church in sharing the gift of life in Christ.

None of this merely belongs to the world of ideas. These are the mysteries that move in this world: the world in which the Word of God became flesh and dwelt; the world in which Christ died and rose from the dead; the world from which Christ ascended to the Father still clinging to the humanity he shares with us; the world into which the Holy Spirit descended, into which the Church was born, and within which the sacraments heal, strengthen, and nourish those becoming united to Christ. These mysteries have not just changed lives; rather, these mysteries have overturned and transformed lives. Those who were dead in sin have been redeemed through Christ's sacrifice and set free as instruments of God's life for others. Even many who actively opposed God's life and gave everything to obstruct "the Way" have been converted from their death-dealing ways so as to be remade as a "source of goodness" for others. And it is with the narrative of one such man that our narrative exploration of the beauty and drama of Christianity shall begin.

Introduction

The Conditions of Formation

Catholic Formation Group

In today's world, most things feel like just "one *more* thing to do." Many of us often encounter preparation for confirmation or, perhaps to a lesser extent, RCIA formation in just that way. It can easily feel like just one more class to take, one more set of requirements to fulfill, one more thing to complete. Rather than a sacrament of initiation, confirmation comes off like the sacrament of inconvenience.

I know this from experience. A few years ago, my wife and I were preparing to send four kids back to school, leaving two little ones at home. Our eldest son was starting a new school for seventh grade after he chose to move on from our parish school at the close of the previous year. It was a good change for him and a mostly seamless transition; even our drop-off-and-pick-up routine for all the kids was easily adjusted. But when I read the letter from our parish about enrolling him in the religious education program for the first time now that he was no longer in Catholic school, I did not see it as an important sacramental formation opportunity. My immediate reaction was that this was indeed "one *more* thing to do."

Our son's outlook was no more favorable. He had long disliked his religion class in school not because he is unreligious but because the textbook-based curriculum oscillated between triviality and banality. In his words, it was "boring" and "easy," and everything was "obvious." Needless to say, he was less than eager to go back for more of the same, except now it would be worse because class was on Sunday morning . . . *early* Sunday morning.

It was not hard to figure out that my son's peers and their parents shared similar feelings. Our pastor and director of religious education (DRE) were more than willing to find a better way to form young people for confirmation, but no better way was on offer. I think we could all agree that reluctance and disinterest are not the ideal conditions for welcoming the Holy Spirit.

Fortunately, a friend and fellow parishioner, Bill Mattison, had come upon the same problem the previous year, and rather than complain he decided to initiate something new. He approached our pastor and offered to lead a formation group himself—one that would meet at his home. He wanted to create a better setting, build stronger community, foster more conversation, and include families in the process. Our pastor thought it was a great idea; besides, pastors are not accustomed to turning down volunteer catechists.

Here is the unsurprising but crucial thing I heard in the subtext of my conversations with Bill: if you want something different, *you* have to do something different. As parents, Bill and his wife Courtney opened their home as a place to form their son and other young people in faith, preparing them for the sacrament of confirmation. My wife and I followed their lead and then built on what they started. Not only did we open our home as the environment for the formation of our son and his peers but also I cast aside the textbook approach and designed a new way for reflecting on and practicing the faith with them. At minimum, this new approach aims to avoid being “boring,” “easy,” and “obvious,” and seeks to prepare each candidate to respond to their full initiation in the Church by becoming a source of goodness for others.

In the pages that follow I present a new proposal for forming people for full initiation in the Catholic Church, through what I call a “Catholic Formation Group.” This proposal is not a theoretical undertaking but rather an approach to formation developed in a concrete faith community with real families and a wonderful group of young people, one of whom is our son. I received my pastor's permission to develop this approach with our parish's young people. I collaborated with Sean Driscoll, our DRE, and promised to pass on to the parish everything I developed. I conferred with the diocesan office for catechesis and likewise pledged to share this approach with the diocese. This book, in part, comes from my debt of gratitude to all of them for supporting

the Catholic Formation Group that I established with the other parents and their young people in our home.

The Room Where It Happens

The first time I taught a confirmation class we met in a school classroom. I was not a school teacher; I was a volunteer catechist—in fact, I was a sophomore in college working alongside another sophomore. It was very clear to us that the classroom where we met was not our own; we were just borrowing it. Come Monday morning, no one should have been able to tell that we had been there. Needless to say, neither we nor our students ever felt at home.

My current parish is fortunate enough to have a parish center with good meeting spaces. When our religious education program meets on Sunday mornings, every room is filled. The catechists do not feel like squatters as I did during my first year teaching confirmation. All the same, no one would say they feel “at home” in the space. It is a meeting space; at best, a parish classroom. It is hard to allow young people to feel like this is something other than just another morning at school.

The Catholic media scholar Marshall McLuhan famously wrote that “the medium is the message.” What he meant is that we all spend so much time trying to determine the meaning of *what* is communicated that we fail to recognize the most powerful message of all is actually the *way* something is communicated. As he shows, a radio *program* is one thing, but radio itself is the predominant message in what it does to soundwaves and to you as the listener. We might consider how every web page presents message after message, and yet the internet itself is the stronger message. The *medium* is the message.

Considering the physical spaces used for faith formation endeavors, as well as how people are instructed to conduct themselves in those spaces, is not just an ancillary concern. These spaces and the habits formed therein are indeed part of the message. In fact, they are often the most powerful part.

In laying out this approach to Catholic formation, therefore, I first draw attention to the space itself where formation activities take place. Along with the physical space, the importance of the environment that is fostered in that space cannot be overestimated. Following my

friend Bill's lead, my proposal to bring formation into a family home is a significant dimension of this overall approach. While I would not go so far as to say that this approach *only* works if it is done in a home, I am confident in claiming that hosting a Catholic Formation Group in a home is ideal.

Since March 2020, when most of our civil institutions were shut down due to the COVID-19 pandemic, every one of us has become aware of how precious and surprisingly tenuous our ability to gather together really is. Not only were parishes and schools almost universally affected by this shutdown but so were family homes. For weeks and even months on end, we really could not gather anywhere except maybe outdoor venues with generous spacing.

The approach I am advancing here in which gathering together in a family home is highly recommended was developed before COVID-19 changed our consciousness about the potential limitations to gathering. While there may again be times when gathering together anywhere for even religious formation is unwise or suspended, privileging the family home as the primary site of this formation remains in place. In fact, this approach allows for greater flexibility over the standard model of meeting in a parish or school under the guidance of one designated minister or teacher, because a Catholic Formation Group that meets in a home can be subdivided into smaller "pod" groups that can then meet in separate family homes as necessary. For example, a group of twelve that meets together in a home could become two groups of six that meet in two different homes, or even three groups of four spread across three homes. If the circumstances are really restrictive or situations dire (whether for reasons like a pandemic or even personal reasons unrelated to global events), this book and the approach it presents empower parents as competent and confident primary educators of their children in faith, and the same could be said of spouses for one another or even a sponsor for an RCIA member.

Since the content of part 1 of this book is available as a one-part companion book that allows everyone involved in and surrounding the formation process to engage the study of the faith themselves and part 2 offers guidance for anyone (teacher, parents, sponsors, etc.) to lead sessions for a Catholic Formation Group, there is a natural and even ready-made flexibility to this approach. Therefore, even though this approach in full calls for regular, face-to-face gatherings ideally conducted for an entire group in a family home, the very nature of this

approach itself grants more power of adaptability and improvisation to parishes, schools, and families alike. This investment in broad-based, shared leadership redounds to the benefit of the entire community in ordinary as well as extraordinary times.

With that caveat in mind, I will move in the next section to lay out this approach to Catholic formation, along with some rationale for each aspect of the approach. The setting itself—the family home—is the first aspect in the whole approach, followed by the regular pattern or rhythm that is developed therein for the meetings of the Catholic Formation Group. The truly Catholic way is to put equal emphasis on the medium *and* the message, and since interest and attention ineluctably tend toward the “message” end of things, I am overemphasizing the “medium” end to make up for it.

Laying Out the Approach

For the most part, we have become dependent on textbooks and third-party programs to run religious education in Catholic schools and parishes alike. I think this is because no matter how passionate any of us might be about the faith, most of us feel unqualified to teach it or form others in it. By and large the options for those in a position of catechizing others is to either attempt to teach what we do not know or merely “press play” on what someone else prepackaged.

What I want to do is equip the person in the room to actually teach, witness to, and mentor those preparing for full initiation in the Catholic Church. This requires something different than just providing resources for you to pass on. It requires a resource to inform and empower you yourself so that *you* become *the resource* for your students.

This is not to say that every catechist, every teacher, every parent is expected to develop their own approach and design all their own lessons. Part of what I am providing in this book is the approach I developed with the specific lessons that comprise it. You will therefore be given the substance of what to teach and guidance in a way of teaching. But the entire approach is built on an investment in *you*. This resource is a support for your leadership. At most, this is sheet music for you, the orchestra conductor.

There is no magic or secret formula in what follows. We are going to invest in basic, simple Catholic things. All of these investments are specifically chosen. In a world that is increasingly fast-paced and

adverse to silence and reflection, we are going to invest in the practices of prayer and journaling. In a media environment where fleeting soundbites are how we communicate with each other, we are going to invest in face-to-face conversation. In a religious milieu where Scripture is at most appealed to for proof-texting or as a repository of moral platitudes, we are going to invest in slowly acquiring a scriptural imagination; indeed, the Bible is our primary text for this approach, alongside the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. And in a cultural moment where everything seems subject to change, we are going to invest in the foundational realities of the Christian faith that provide us a solid ground on which to stand: the person of Christ, the sacraments, and the meaning of life as communion.

Home (duration: approximately 90 minutes weekly)

If we want people to feel at home in the mission of the Church, then why not use a home to form them for it? When you have guests over for dinner, you open your home and use it intentionally. When you celebrate Christmas at home, you use your home intentionally. When you put your house on the market, you prepare it intentionally. The same can be true of opening a home for the purposes of religious formation: use it intentionally.

The intentional uses of a home for this particular purpose include the following: a place to pray, a place to reflect, a place to study and learn, a place to eat together, and a place to welcome families. With the exception of meeting for things like Eucharistic Adoration, our Catholic Formation Group always meets at our home. When the young people arrive, they just hang out for a while, shooting hoops or chatting. We have a basement in our house, where I put some tables together to use as our primary meeting space. When we break for personal journaling time, the young people scatter a little bit to have some privacy. When they eat together in smaller groups (lunch every time), they sit at the dining room table or the kitchen table. Their parents are able to join in the lessons, mingle in the kitchen, and chat over a light meal, while siblings who often come can play together inside or outside. A home is a natural setting for all these activities.

Moving from one kind of space to another, all for different aspects of one complete formation session each week, establishes an atmosphere of integration. A school classroom or a parish center cannot

easily provide for this. Since a primary aim of this period of formation is the further integration of faith into each person's everyday life, the setting of a home establishes the conditions for reinforcing that very message. The medium—the environment—serves the message.

Within this setting, we established a regular pattern for our 90-minute meetings, which we held on Sunday:

11:30 a.m.	Arrival
11:45–11:55	Opening prayer and prayer journaling
11:55–12:10	Lunch and small group conversations
12:10–1:00	Lesson and discussion
1:00 p.m.	Closing prayer

Opening Prayer

The opening prayer each week is an opportunity to introduce group members to common but sometimes neglected Catholic prayers. Our regular opening prayer is the Angelus, which is traditionally prayed thrice daily: 6 a.m., noon, and 6 p.m. The regular recitation of this prayer within our group gives each person something to carry with them not just for a year but for life.

While this particular prayer does not necessarily need to be used, there is a certain genius to the Angelus and that genius is twofold. On the one hand, the prayer invites regular contemplation of the central mystery of our salvation: the Incarnation. On the other hand, it is incredibly brief. After a few weeks of praying this prayer once, twice, or even thrice daily, the words of Luke 1 and John 1 that give the prayer its basic structure are impressed upon your memory, while the rhythm of the three Hail Marys draw your heart and mind into God's gentle presence. In our case, we pray it together once a week with the recommendation to pray it at least daily. The Angelus is a simple practice of regular formation into the mystery of the Incarnation.

Prayer Journaling

Rare is the person who says they have enough time to themselves, with plenty of time to think. It is no secret that people today feel busier and more hurried than ever before. As a counter-practice, our formation group commits to 7–10 minutes of prayer journaling at the beginning of each meeting. My hope is that this habit becomes part of their regular, perhaps even daily lives.

Many times, I do not provide the group members with any prompt other than to suggest that they begin with the words, “Dear Jesus.” This is part of what makes this exercise “prayer journaling” and not just writing to yourself. It is an address to the Lord. At other times, as you will see in the sessions that follow, I do provide prompts to which the members can respond. Sometimes those prompts tie in to the group conversations or lesson to follow, and sometimes not. The primary objective here is simply to give the time for writing directly to the Lord and, secondarily, to build up this habit of silence and reflection.

Meal and Conversation

Two other regular practices to incorporate into the regular rhythm of this formation are the practice of eating together and the practice of face-to-face conversation. Both of these practices have become even more desired and appreciated after the suspension of group gatherings due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Even before this virus disrupted our lives, I chose the meeting time I did for this group in part so that we would be able to eat a simple meal together. The group of parents agreed to take turns in providing the meal each week. We provide enough food not only for the group members but also for the parents and other family members who might join from week to week. Our group members sit together in smaller groups of four or five to eat together *at a table*. This meal time together is a time for nonfrivolous conversation, meaning that they are prompted to talk to each other about things that actually matter. As you will see in each session to follow, oftentimes I give them a prompt for the conversations or ask them to share with each other a “high and low” from the previous week. This is simple, not necessarily pious stuff. But it is an important part of the formation we hope to provide: reclaiming the skills for direct, interpersonal communication.¹

1. Among many other possible sources, you may be interested in the following two works about the loss of the skills for direct communication in the modern world: Sherry Turkle, *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other* (New York: Basic Books, 2012); and Sherry Turkle, *Reclaiming Conversation: The Power of Talk in a Digital Age*, reprint ed. (New York: Penguin Books, 2016).

During this time for meal and conversation, parents in our group also sit and eat together. As you might imagine, this is a valuable way to build community among parents and foster meaningful though organic conversation among themselves. In the first few movements of each meeting, we have set an important tone by giving our attention to the Lord through prayer and journaling, and to each other through meal and conversation.

Testimonials

Beginning with the mini-unit that explores the question “Who is Jesus?” there is an important opportunity to add personal testimonials to group meetings. As you will read, the complementary question of “Who is Jesus *for me*?” goes right along with the question we explore in sessions 7–10. Therefore, for sessions 8, 9, and 10, I invite parents of my teenagers preparing for confirmation to offer short testimonials in response to that personal question of faith. For groups forming adults for full initiation into the Church, these testimonials could be from sponsors, spouses, or other family members.

In the second semester or unit of the Catholic Formation Group’s meetings, the group members themselves (those preparing for initiation in the Church) share their own testimonials. By that point, they have benefitted from listening to the testimonies of more mature disciples (parents, sponsors, etc.) and have been given the time and opportunity to consider their own response. These are not intended to be the *final* testimony to faith in Jesus that each person will provide in their life; instead, these are often the *first* testimony someone gives. This means, of course, that these are not intended to be perfect; they are intended to be sincere. Since each testimonial is only meant to be 2–3 minutes, and since there are typically two and no more than three testimonials shared in a session, these take about 10 minutes of the group meeting time. In terms of the importance of this practice, studies show that Catholics are, by and large, “incredibly inarticulate about their faith.”² This is a small, direct, intentional practice aimed at building up articulacy.

2. Christian Smith, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 131.

Lesson

The chapters to follow will include details on each of the lessons. For now, it suffices to say that my approach to developing these lessons begins with narrative (hence, the story of St. Paul) that then introduces us to the centrality of the person of Jesus followed by a focused preparation for Advent. In beginning this way, we also begin an immersion into Scripture, slowly building up our skills of biblical literacy and developing a scriptural imagination as we go along. In the second semester, this scriptural imagination is then expanded and opens up to an exploration of the meaning of creation, the gifts of the Holy Spirit, the development of virtue, the conditions of discipleship, and the sacraments.

Especially throughout the “Lesson” portion of these Reflection and Practice sessions, I want to *avoid* providing an overly scripted “lesson plan.” My job is to give the leaders of various Catholic Formation Groups enough material and direction for *you* to lead well. I want you to claim and trust in your own competence and creativity, and I hope that part 1 of this book helps build up your knowledge, interest, fluency, and imaginative energy. What I provide in these lessons, then, is the fruit of my own leadership of a Catholic Formation Group. If we were each directors of our own theatrical companies, I would be one director offering performance notes to other directors. I know full well that textbooks tend toward taking the agency away from a catechist or teacher by over-scripting. Again, I am fully committed to *avoiding* a textbook approach, so if at times I come close to over-scripting myself, please accept my apology in advance and by all means, use what is useful and leave the rest.

Closing Prayer

I have incorporated many different kinds of closing prayers for each of our meetings, sometimes specifically chosen because of what we are studying and sometimes not. This is an appropriate time to share personal intentions, especially when closing with the Lord’s Prayer. As you will see, though, this is also an opportunity to immerse ourselves in the prayers of the saints or invite different people to occasionally lead spontaneous prayer.

Forming Catholics for Mission

When I led my first Catholic Formation Group, ten young people and their families were part of the group. This is a really good number for one of these groups, which could easily grow to fourteen or fifteen and maintain the same effectiveness, or even run smaller if necessary. I would consider twenty members to be the absolute maximum for an effective group. The size of the group is of course left to the leader's and the parish's discretion but keeping these groups to a more modest size means that everyone can sit at the same table (literally) and that everyone can be part of the conversation. It is also difficult to host larger groups in a family home. In parishes with a larger population, I could easily imagine multiple groups of about this size running simultaneously, perhaps on different days of the week.

When initiating a Catholic Formation Group and inviting people to join, it is important to let them know what is entailed and what is expected. This is especially important for the parents of teenagers preparing for confirmation. A Catholic Formation Group is *not* a drop-off-and-pick-up kind of religious education. Instead, this intends to draw families in, empower and partner with parents, and bridge the divide between parish (or school) and home. In my email to parents of my first Catholic Formation Group, I shared with them what I later reinforced at our first meeting:

I believe it is crucial for parents to be personally involved in this formation with their sons and daughters. While this does not mean that I would expect parents to sit in on all our sessions, I will welcome the regular contributions of parents, including asking people to share some of their own personal faith stories with the young people throughout the year. Mentoring and modeling is crucial, and as parents I think we have the opportunity to offer those things in an especially powerful way. As compared with other ways of faith formation, this one will require more from us parents on a regular basis.

The setting and basic approach that I have described above intends to create conditions conducive to the formation of Catholics toward the end of becoming a "source of goodness." It is about instilling within them the mission of the Church as their own life mission and empowering them to claim ownership of that mission. The leaders of

the Catholic Formation Group *lead* this effort, but those leaders are not solely responsible. It takes a parish (or school) and it takes families. The sacraments of initiation should no longer be encountered as sacraments of inconvenience. These are gifts of Christ to his Church, and these gifts immerse us, strengthen us, and nourish us into *his* life.

If we want to form Catholics who are committed, courageous, and charitable, then we need to form them better to receive and respond to the gifts of Christ through the Holy Spirit. We need to do better than we have been doing; we need something different. By “we,” I mean the Church. People are leaving the Catholic Church in droves. According to one recent study, the typical age of disaffiliation is now thirteen.³ We need to form those who are being fully initiated in the Church to become agents of renewal who live lives that inspire *other people* to believe and to offer their lives to the love of Christ. We need Catholics to be sources of goodness and witnesses to the gospel. But as I learned from my friend Bill, if we want something different, then *we* need to do something different. So let’s do it.

3. Robert McCarty and John Vitek, *Going, Going, Gone: The Dynamics of Disaffiliation in Young Catholics* (Winona, MN: Saint Mary’s Press, 2018).

The Way

Overview

A Look from Above

For each session, I will use this “look from above” to address the context of this particular session within the progression of sessions throughout the year. Oftentimes, this will include looking back and looking ahead, as well as identifying various “mini-units” within the two larger units of the whole (those two larger units are sessions 1–12 and sessions 14–25, respectively, with session 13 serving as a “reorientation” at the midway point). Since this is the first session of our time together, what precedes this session is, undoubtedly, inviting and communicating basic information with members of your Catholic Formation Group, recruiting and communicating with other leaders for the group (including parents for confirmation preparation or spouses/family members for RCIA prep), establishing the schedule of meetings for the year, and securing a meeting space, which is preferably in a home.

A Closer Look

The “closer look” is an opportunity to introduce this particular session more specifically. In this first session, the general objectives are twofold: first, to introduce the group to the idea of this approach to formation along with how sessions will be structured, and second, to teach about baptism and confirmation in relation to what we know about the way of life in the earliest Christian communities. The second objective provides the rationale—the “why”—for the first objective. In other words, because of the basic pattern for Christian formation that goes all the way back to the first Christian communities, our Catholic Formation Group will proceed the way it does.

In the following sessions, a basic three-part schema will be employed for organizing these “Reflection and Practice” chapters. Following an introduction like this one, the first movement will be entitled “Holy Conversation” that includes opening prayer, journaling, and conversation/meal; the second movement will lay out the lesson (this is the longest section); and the third movement deals with the closing prayer. For this first session, though, the organization will be a bit different since everything is just getting started and explaining the format of the group meetings is itself one of the tasks of this session.

For teenagers preparing for confirmation, all parents should be present at this introductory session, while families are welcome as always. For adults in RCIA, significant others and family members are welcome, as always, while including godparents/sponsors would be ideal.

1st Movement – Getting Started

1. Welcome and Introductions
2. Opening Prayer: the Angelus (see online resource; this is the regular opening prayer for our sessions)¹

Brief Catechesis on the Angelus: It is a traditional Catholic prayer that meditates on the mystery of the Incarnation. In large part, this prayer is drawn from the Angel Gabriel’s Annunciation to Mary in the Gospel of Luke. Traditionally, Catholics pray this prayer three times a day—6 a.m., noon, and 6 p.m.—in order to mark the beginning, middle, and end of the day. Since we will be praying this together, there is a part for the leader and then responses for the whole group. Within a few months, we should all have this entire prayer memorized.

3. Basic Introduction to the Catholic Formation Group (by leader)

Sample intro: We gather together as preparation for receiving the sacrament of confirmation (or sacraments of initiation for RCIA), but we should not view this merely as a “class.” This is a “Catholic Formation Group” because together we are accompanying and assisting each other in our formation as Catholics. This formation is in part about preparing to

1. As a reminder, the online resource is available at leonardjdelorenzo.com/turn-resources.

receive the sacrament(s), but Catholic formation itself is lifelong. Together, this group is meant to help us all in our lifelong formation as Catholics.

2nd Movement – Getting Our Bearings

1. Opening Exercise: On Baptism

Brief Large Group Discussion: What do you think happened to you at your baptism? (For RCIA: What do you think *will* happen to you at your baptism?) Share responses.

To Teach (by leader; distribute handout for this session from the online resource)

Three things happen right in a row in the baptismal rite:

- Renunciation of sin, of the “way of Satan”—i.e., like three “Nos”
- Profession of faith in the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit —i.e., like three “Yeses”
- Immersion into this *life* of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit

First, a person is separated from the “old way” of sin. Second, a person is committed to the “new way” of God. Third, the immersion makes the words true.

Takeaway: Baptism is the gift of new life in God, given for *our own good*.

2. This “Way” of Life

To Teach:

To become a Christian in baptism is not just to receive *something* but to be immersed into a *life*. We could even say this is a “way of life.”

In fact, before Christians were called “Christians,” they were recognized for their “Way” of life. Christianity was initially just called “The Way.” We want to see what this “Way” of new life in God was.

Read Together: Acts 2:42-47 (on handout “The Way” in online resource)

Question for the Group: From this passage, what did Christians do from the very beginning? There are four things:

- They studied the teachings of the apostles (the gospel, the tradition).
- They shared in a communal life (they were together, sharing needs and gifts). Notice: they sold their property and gave to the poor (v. 45) and practiced charity.
- They broke bread together (an early indication of the Eucharist).
- They prayed regularly.

Connect to our Catholic Formation Group:

The four pillars of “the Way” in the earliest Christian community are the four pillars of our Catholic Formation Group:

- We will study the faith together, from Scripture and the tradition passed down from the apostles.
- We will practice being together and sharing things with each other, supporting each other, challenging each other, and holding each other accountable to practicing charity in our lives.
- We will share meals together.
- We will pray together.

Notice the end of verse 47: “And every day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.”

- Those who are formed in and practice the Christian life—this “Way”—give life to others.
- This is a way to think about confirmation: If baptism is a gift given for *our own good*, then in confirmation we are given the grace to become *a source of goodness for others*. A Catholic Christian receives life from God and shares that life with others. Our formation this year is about each of us becoming *a source of goodness*.

3. Structure of Catholic Formation Group Sessions

We will practice a basic rhythm for our sessions that builds off of those four pillars of “the Way”:

- Opening Prayer: Angelus (some variations possible for Lent)
- Prayer Journaling for 7–10 minutes
- Meal and conversation in small groups for about 20 minutes
- Lesson, with discussion, with a lot of attention to reading Scripture (40–60 minutes)
- Closing Prayer

To every session, group members should bring a Bible, journal, pen, and their full attention.

3rd Movement – Encouraging Buy-In

Note: If your group is comprised of teenagers preparing for confirmation, then the teens and the parents will be separated for this next period. If your group is for adults in RCIA, then you may want to do both parts with the whole group.

1. Teenagers Break Off into Small Groups (four people in each)

Prepare questions for each member to write about for several minutes on their own. It is recommended that you have the members turn in what they write here to the group leader, so that the leader can be aware of what each member is interested in, worried about, and hoping to do. Therefore, it may be best to distribute a handout (see online resource) with questions and room for them to write. Allow time in small groups for members to discuss what they wrote about, and what they think of this whole thing.

2. Parents of Teenagers Remain with Leader (to share expectations, answer questions, elicit buy-in)

Emphasize: As the leader—or as a group of leaders—you want to create an *environment* that is conducive to members both growing in faith and integrating faith into their lives.

Emphasize: This is an *environment* that all of you must nurture together, although you (as leader) are taking the lead.

Name: The kind of contributions you hope/expect parents to make:

- At times, teach on certain topics or help with leadership of certain sessions, as people are able and comfortable.
- Share personal witness of your own faith, for which there will be several opportunities.
- Participate in group sessions, learning alongside group members.
- Follow up on discussions at home.
- Read along with the first part of this book as part of your own study. (This is doubly important since this form of study also prepares parents to contribute to and guide their children's formation throughout the year, and especially to take on a more active role should unforeseen circumstances arise that preclude the group from meeting.)
- Regarding meals for the group (since eating together is important), here is the ideal arrangement: Choose one parent who will coordinate a meal schedule. Families take turns providing simple meals for the entire group.

Ask: What are their own expectations or concerns or interests? Invite questions and feedback.

4th Movement – Closing Prayer

Pray the Lord's Prayer, possibly after inviting people to share their intentions.