

Assessment in Parish Religious Education

Some parish religious educators equate assessment with formal testing and feel that it is inappropriate in faith formation programs. All would agree that we can never measure the depth of an individual's faith in God. However, assessment can be seen through a wider lens. Religious education assessment can be a form of ongoing communication among students, catechists, and families. Assessment can communicate young people's growth in knowledge about the Catholic faith. It can also provide an opportunity for them to communicate how they are integrating faith knowledge into their lives. This communication can help catechists and families to assist young people on their faith journey in a more effective ways.

Assessment, which involves much more than using and grading a standardized test, is an integral part of all teaching and learning. Assessment involves helping learners move to higher levels of thinking. Thinking moves from simple comprehension to application, analysis, and synthesis where students can apply what they have learned in ways that help them produce new ideas for how they wish to live. This kind of assessment moves far beyond the fill-in-the-blanks or true and false kinds of questions. While the latter strategies still have their place in testing,

they are not the totality of what true assessment is about.

Faith First Legacy Edition contains a variety of strategies to assist catechists and learners in communicating both what is to be learned and what has already been learned. The opening chapter at each grade level, "Welcome to Faith First," invites the young people to activate their prior knowledge and to communicate what they would like to learn during the year. The unit opener pages that introduce each of the four units function in the same way. Each chapter opener page invites the children both to tell what they already know about a topic and to name how that topic has touched their human experience in some way.

Once the presentation of the chapter concepts has begun, the catechist uses a variety of strategies and activities to help young people demonstrate both their comprehension and application of the concepts to practical situations. From these exercises catechists learn in informal ways how well their learners are grasping the lesson concepts and relating them to prior knowledge and to life.

Faith First incorporates a unique assessment feature in each chapter to assist both catechists

and learners. The sixth page in each chapter asks the critical question, “What Difference Does Faith Make in My Life?” The activity on the pages asks the young people to explore ways that they can integrate the faith concepts in the chapter into life situations in ways that would make a difference for others. The page closes with a challenge to the learners to make a personal faith choice. Catechists will encourage more authentic responses to these activities by participating in the process themselves and appropriately sharing their own experiences of living the faith concepts presented in the lesson.

Every *Faith First Legacy Edition* chapter ends with an assessment feature called “We Remember.” This is a very short review of the key lesson concepts. It is not so much a quiz as a way for the catechist to reinforce the key concepts and find out what learning has occurred. This activity also provides some feedback for parents, since it is on the opposite side of the “With My Family” page that will be sent home. The inclusion of such a feature can help to mitigate that age-old exchange that often occurs after religion class between parent and child: “What happened in religion class today?” “Nothing.”

Faith First Legacy Edition also incorporates two-page unit reviews. These reviews begin with two cognitive devices that demonstrate what the young people have retained about the main concepts taught in the unit. The third element asks the student to respond to the important question: “What are the three most important things you learned in this unit?” This helps catechists and parents to see what has seemed most important to the child—often an indicator not only of how well the concept was taught but of what the child most needed to know. A fourth element always relates to one of the Scripture stories in the unit.

There is, of course, a formal two-page test for each chapter. These tests, found in the *Assessment Tools* booklets, follow a similar format to the unit reviews. They move from a cognitive understanding of faith concepts and vocabulary to exercises that allow young people to express their understanding and application of concepts in their own words. Finally, learners are asked to reflect on a key chapter concept and think about what difference it will make in their lives. This final question should never be graded along with rest of the test. The young people’s response to this question is an

expression of personal faith and truly cannot be measured.

The *Assessment Tools* booklets contain other support as well. Among the tools you will find are some guidelines for evaluating student work. These guidelines are called rubrics. The goal of these rubrics is not to assign letter grades to students in parish religious education. Rather, these rubrics give catechists some written materials to evaluate the success of their own teaching and to use on occasions when they are discussing the children’s participation and progress in the religion classes with parents.

Assessment is never a measure of a child’s personal faith. However, using a variety of both formal and informal assessment tools will help catechists to evaluate how well they are teaching, and to give both the students and their parents feedback on how well the young people have learned key concepts.

FOR REFLECTION

- *What is your personal feeling about assessment in religious education?*
- *Which assessment tools in Faith First do you think will be important to incorporate into your catechetical program?*