

**Threefold Failure of  
'Share the Good News'**

**National Directory for Catechesis in Ireland**



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2021

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<http://eannajohnson.org/wp/general-catechesis/share-the-good-news-a-review/>

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Dr Johnson has over twenty-five years of successful international experience in management consultancy (including significant assignments in education & training): analysing programmes and situations, working with clients to devise and implement solutions for beneficial change. He progressed to partnership in one of Ireland's, and the world's, top firms.

Éanna's love for his grandchildren, and for all children, impelled him to study the *Allive-O* Catechetics Programme prescribed by the Bishops' Conference for use in Ireland's Catholic Primary Schools. *Allive-O* then became the research project for his PhD in Theology awarded by the Pontifical University, St Patrick's College, Maynooth, Ireland, (thesis accessible at <http://eprints.nuim.ie/3076/>).

When the *National Directory for Catechesis* project was announced, Dr Johnson responded to the initial invitation for submissions, and then was one of those invited in 2006 by the National Catechetics Office in Maynooth to comment on the first Draft of the Directory. He subsequently studied & submitted comments on the fourth Draft and Final *Directory*.

## 1. What is a 'National Directory for Catechesis'; how has it Failed?

*Catechesis* is teaching the truths of Catholic Faith in a systematic way, with the aim of bringing people into the fullness of Christian life. The principal sources for Catholic Catechesis are Scripture, Sacred Tradition and the Church's Magisterium (authoritative teaching service). Catechesis is a vital part of *Evangelisation*, which is the essential mission of the Church; she exists in order to evangelise. Evangelisation means bringing the Good News of Faith in Jesus Christ to all, transforming humanity and making it new.

The Church has provided many helpful documents giving information and guidance on Catechesis – resources for catechesis available today must surely be the best ever in the history of the Church. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* is a sure and authentic reference on content, what should be taught in catechesis. The *General Directory for Catechesis* is another 'standard of reference', with principles and practical guidelines on presentation, how to do catechesis.

The Church strongly recommends a comprehensive Analysis of the Catechetical Situation at Diocesan or Bishops' Conference level (an objective 'reality-check'), to form the basis for a Programme of Catechetical Action.

To help apply the *General Directory for Catechesis* in the local territory, the Church encourages the preparation of National Catechetical Directories, clarifying the concept of catechesis: its nature, object, contents, method and those to whom it is addressed. A Catechetical Situation Analysis and Action Programme may be incorporated into a local Directory for Catechesis.

Pope St John Paul II urged all Bishops to have a passion for Catechesis, assuring them that they would have the joy and consolation of seeing their Churches flourishing because catechesis was given as Jesus wished.

The Irish Bishops' Conference commissioned the preparation of *Share the Good News – National Directory for Catechesis in Ireland*, starting in 2005 and launched in 2011. *Share the Good News'* ten-year Implementation Plan has now concluded in 2021, but has achieved nothing of positive significance for Catholic catechesis in Ireland – how did this happen?

Tragically, analysis reveals that *Share the Good News* departed significantly in several ways from the teaching of the Church; the Analysis of the Catechetical Situation lacked objectivity and was effectively an endorsement of the unsatisfactory *status quo*; and the unrealistic Programme of Action would not promote, but rather undermine, authentic Catholic Catechesis.

Positive elements and features in *Share the Good News* may give the impression that the document is satisfactory, or usable selectively. However, *Share the Good News* is intrinsically flawed and so should be set aside.

## 2. First Failure: Unfaithful to Church Teaching.

*Share the Good News*, in its Preface, signals unfaithfulness to Church teaching, stating that it is seeking renewal “in the spirit of the Second Vatican Council and of pastoral attentiveness to the Church’s catechesis” (emphasis added). Authentic Church teaching is found in the documents of the Council, not in this vague alleged “*spirit of the Council*”, which could mean anything and has been invoked in support of dissent. The *General Directory for Catechesis* requires “*perfect harmony*” with the Church’s catechesis, yet *Share the Good News* offers only “*pastoral attentiveness*”, which may sound nice but doesn’t actually commit to anything.

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There was genuine renewal in Catholic catechesis following on from the Second Vatican Council. Sadly, movements also emerged in some influential catechetical circles giving undue priority to human experience, to the neglect of spiritual realities – led by the attractive, but deeply flawed, ‘*Dutch Catechism*’ of 1966. This resulted in widespread and serious problems in Catholic catechesis, affecting mainly the developed world, including Ireland. These problems were identified by Pope St John Paul II (in *Catechesi Tradendae* of 1979), as chiefly an overall ‘*horizontalist*’ or this-worldly view, with omission or neglect of elements essential to the Church’s faith. Omissions and imbalances can seriously damage Faith, but of their nature, can be very difficult to detect and identify (law courts know the omissions danger, and so require witnesses to swear to tell not only the truth, but also the whole truth).

*Share the Good News* suffers from the same problems as those identified above by Pope St John Paul II. Though there are well written sections, nevertheless, right through the document, *Share the Good News* frequently displays an unbalanced focus on a this-world perspective, with omission or neglect of eternal spiritual realities.

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A *National Directory for Catechesis* should be all about Catholic Catechesis in the context of Evangelisation in applying at the local level the excellent principles and guidance of the *General Directory for Catechesis*. The most serious way in which *Share the Good News* departs from the teaching of the Church is that it marginalizes Catechesis and Evangelisation and builds instead on two contrary concepts, “*Religious Education*” and “*Faith Development*”, which are not recommended, nor even mentioned, in the *General Directory for Catechesis*.

Right through *Share the Good News*, from Contents page to final Implementation Plan, “*Religious Education*” is favoured, while Catholic Catechesis, the main purpose, the *raison d’être*, of the Directory, is progressively marginalized into virtual irrelevance. Similarly, “*Faith Development*” envelops, downgrades and takes over from Evangelisation, the very identity and essential mission of the Church. What are these interlopers, “*Religious Education*” and “*Faith Development*”, and what are they doing where they have no business to be?

The term ‘religious education’ is often used in different contexts, but without any standard definition, so *Share the Good News* is lacking in professionalism by omitting to define what it means by the term. *Share the Good News* gives only a glowing but dubious list of alleged benefits of “*Religious Education*”, while also making clear it is not Catholic catechesis.

*Share the Good News* endorses and embraces ‘Religious Education’ as a State examination subject at Junior and Leaving Cert levels in the Republic of Ireland’s secondary schools, so it seems reasonable that this is what *Share the Good News* means by “*Religious Education*”. The State exam Syllabi give equal value to a broad range of religions and non-religious views of life, and to a variety of ethical codes and norms for behaviour. The perspective of the State exam syllabi is therefore essentially agnostic, the view that God is unknown or unknowable.

Among religions, the State exam Syllabi give greatest attention to Christianity, not because it is true or in any way better than any other religion, but only because of Christianity's influence on Irish culture. The Syllabi presentation of a generic 'Christianity' is inadequate, and also constructively anti-Catholic, because "Catholic" (the religion of the great majority of Irish people for the past 1,500 years) is never mentioned, not even in the Leaving Cert section: 'Religion: the Irish experience'.

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The version of "*Religious Education*" endorsed by *Share the Good News* is hostile to authentic Catholic Catechesis. There is a place in Catholic Catechesis for teaching about other religions and non-religious world views, but pupils should first have a grounding in Catholic faith; teaching must be from a Catholic perspective and age-appropriate considering the degree of maturity of pupils.

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"*Faith Development*" is treated further in Section 4 below.

### 3 Second Failure: Situation Analysis Endorses Failed Catechesis

The Church recommends carrying out an Analysis of the catechetical Situation at the level of the Diocese or Bishops' Conference, leading to formulation of a Programme of catechetical Action. The Situation Analysis must be objective, comprehensive and thorough, focusing on the state of catechesis, along with the general religious and socio-cultural situations. The Analysis and Action Programme may stand alone or may be incorporated into a Directory for Catechesis.

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*Share the Good News* included a Situation Analysis which was wide-ranging, but lacked objectivity.

Learning Assessment (evaluation of outcomes of learning, what has been achieved) is professionally accepted as essential for any educational endeavour, especially after changes have been made. Massive changes were made in Irish Catholic school catechesis in the 1970s, but no Learning Assessment, or other objective professional means of evaluation, were put in place to evaluate the success or otherwise of the new programmes. Preparation of a National Directory for Catechesis would have benefitted from Learning Assessment or other professional objective professional initiatives of evaluation, but none were done.

*Share the Good News'* analysis gave unqualified approval of the existing catechetical situation, but this was essentially a self-evaluation and a self-endorsement.

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An objective assessment would have identified a catastrophic state of catechesis, founded on the adoption by Ireland's catechetical establishment of the *anthropological-experiential* or human experience approach since 1973, setting aside the Church's required approach, the 'pedagogy of God', which is the approach of Jesus and the Church.

In relation to primary school catechesis, the *Alive-O Programme* was in use, introduced in 1996, after two series of the *Children of God* programme, originally launched in the 1970s. The *Children of God* series fell short of satisfactory, while *Alive-O* was extremely poor, both theologically and pedagogically. Nevertheless, *Share the Good News* gave unqualified approval for the primary school situation.

(Initiated by a 2002 Bishops' Conference decision, a new Curriculum and the improved but still short of satisfactory '*Grow in Love*' replaced *Alive-O* from 2015 to 2019. *Grow in Love* is catechesis and so goes contrary to *Share the Good News*, which specifies only agnostic "*Religious Education*" in primary schools, no Catholic catechesis).

At secondary level Catholic schools once had a good religion programme with standard text books, but in the 1970s this programme was simply dropped and not replaced, leaving a highly unsatisfactory chaotic situation. After 25 years the 'solution' to this problem was to hand over control to the secular State for an agnostic type of 'Religious Education' as a subject in the Junior and Leaving Certificate public examinations. Exam uptake by students is poor – less than half for Junior Cert and only 5% at the crucial Leaving Cert. Nevertheless, *Share the Good News* gave unqualified endorsement of this disastrous situation for Catholic secondary schools.

There used to be a partnership for education in Catholic faith between home, school and parish, not perfect, but each party knew their role and worked at it. The new programmes introduced since the 1970s shattered this partnership, because parents and clergy no longer knew or understood the strange, and often voluminous programmes. Martin Kennedy's 1999 Study found that parents and clergy knew so little of the *Children of God* series and were so disconnected from the school and each other that the Report was titled, '*Islands Apart*'. Instead of partnership, control now rested with the catechetics establishment, which produced the programmes and trained the teachers.

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Professional studies and indications from other sources showed unsatisfactory outcomes of Catholic catechesis, including the following examples:

A professional survey among the general population in Ireland, carried out by Millward Brown in 2007, revealed very low levels of basic religious knowledge. An islandwide Survey carried out in 2007 and 2018 by this author revealed unacceptably poor knowledge of the basics of Catholic faith among pupils after completion of the 8-year *Alive-O Programme*. The 2017 professionally conducted study by Barna Research Group ('Finding Faith in Ireland') among 14-25 year-olds in the Republic of Ireland revealed high levels of nominal Catholicism with a muddled understanding of core Christian teachings.

On regular visits to his parish primary schools, the late Fr Ronnie Neville used ask questions, especially, "Is Jesus God?", to which 70-80% of pupils would answer, "No, Father. Jesus is not God; he is just son of God". The 2018 Referendum on Abortion passed by 66%, and the younger the age group (the more recently completed 14 years of Catholic schooling) the higher the YES to abortion vote, peaking at 88% for 18-24 year-olds.

#### 4. Third Failure: Programme of Action Promotes “*Religious Education*”, marginalizes Catechesis

The Church recommends formulation of a Programme of Catechetical Action, which could be incorporated into a Directory for Catechesis. *Share the Good News*’ Implementation Plan should be for *Catholic Catechesis in the context of Evangelisation*, but in fact the Plan is all about “*Faith Development*”, with “*Religious Education*” featuring prominently, while Catechesis and Evangelisation are marginalized. The task of a National Directory for Catechesis is local application of the *General Directory for Catechesis*, which neither recommends nor even mentions ‘faith development’, so what’s happening here? What is “*Faith Development*”?

The term ‘faith development’ is used in differing contexts, but has no standard definition. Initially, in para 31, *Share the Good News* introduces “*Faith Development*” as virtually synonymous with Evangelisation, but by para 43 “*Faith Development*” has taken over and ‘evangelisation’ has disappeared, leaving just one aspect, ‘new evangelisation’, downgraded to an element within “*Faith Development*”. The reason given for this switch (reminiscent of the old 3-card trick) is that “*Faith Development*” is ‘all-inclusive’, which does not add up, given that Evangelisation is the essential mission and identity of the Church, she exists to evangelise – what can be more inclusive than that!

*Share the Good News*’ Implementation Plan hugely expands the definition of “*Faith Development*” to include virtually all aspects of Church life. The Plan thereby sets up this catch-all “*Faith Development*” as a vehicle for promotion of agnostic “*Religious Education*”, undermining true Catholic faith, throughout the entire Church in Ireland.

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One of the Implementation Plan’s proposals is that Catholic schools should have no Catholic catechesis, only agnostic State “*Religious Education*”, while catechesis should be confined to home and parish. This proposal would effectively mean little or no catechesis, because most Catholic parents were poorly prepared to catechise, being victims of defective religion programmes during their own 14 years of Catholic schooling. Active parish clergy (2,900 in 2010) were reducing in numbers, over-worked, ageing and not trained in catechesis, therefore unprepared for the huge extra workload of catechising the 860,000 students from over 4,000 Catholic schools.

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To achieve its **Implementation Plan** *Share the Good News* proposes a massive “**Faith Development**” structure. Each of Ireland’s 1,355 parishes will have a **Faith Development Coordinator** with responsibility for faith development in the parish. Faith Development in each of 26 Dioceses will be overseen by a **Diocesan Director of Faith Development** and a **Faith Development Services Team**, with **Diocesan Faith Development Advisers** and administrative support.

At national level the work of Faith Development will be overseen, coordinated and supported by a **National Faith Development Team**, linked to the National Catechetical Office. The **Team** will be made up of middle-management personnel from relevant Episcopal Conference departments, overseen by one of its members – Bishops will be excluded. This proposal would amount to a usurpation of Episcopal authority, an effective ‘take-over’ of most of Church life, cutting across and undermining existing lines of communication and authority, inviting organisational chaos, while elevating the catechetical establishment to a position of national influence in all aspects of Church life.

*Share the Good News* proposes that its “**Faith Development**” structure would require additional professionally qualified and experienced paid staff, and, while accepting that significant financial resources will be required, gives no estimate of staff numbers or costs. Commensurate with its wide and high-level range of responsibilities a ‘ball-park’ estimate of this proposed “**Faith Development**” structure would be 1,400 staff, with operational support, at an ongoing total cost of c.€100 million per year.



Now at the end of *Share the Good News* 10-year Implementation Plan, the proposed new “*Faith Development*” Structure has not been set up. The high costs and the improbability of attracting the number and calibre of people required, must surely have rendered this “*Faith Development*” proposal effectively *unimplementable*.

A ‘**National Faith Development Team**’ was established which included two Bishops, wisely rejecting *Share the Good News*’ plan to exclude bishops. The new Team has organised some good events, but these events could equally have been organised through existing structures of the Bishops’ Conference.

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*Share the Good News*’ **Implementation Plan** contains nothing to correct the serious problems and deficiencies in Ireland’s Catholic Catechesis. *Share the Good News* has not achieved anything of positive significance for Catholic Catechesis during the ten years since launch in 2011.

## 5. Conclusions

*Share the Good News* is presented as the *National Directory for Catechesis in Ireland*, but this is just not so, because Catechesis is actually marginalized in favour of an agnostic “*Religious Education*”, incompatible with genuine Catechesis. Positive aspects of *Share the Good News* may encourage acceptance, but the document is intrinsically flawed and so is better set aside.

Pope St John Paul II assured Bishops they would have joy in seeing their Churches flourishing because catechesis was given in them as Jesus wished. In the 40+ years since the Pope’s visit to Ireland our Church could hardly be described as ‘flourishing’, more like ‘free-fall’, while we have seen radical changes for the worse in catechesis – coincidence or connection?

There is need for authentic reform and renewal of Catholic catechesis in Ireland, a challenging task in our increasingly secularised environment, but we can rely on the guidance of the Holy Spirit, thankful that the resources for catechesis have never been better.

Catechesis in schools used play a vital role, in partnership with home and parish, in giving young people a lifelong foundation ‘to know Jesus more clearly, love him more dearly, and follow him more nearly’. Introduction of defective religion programmes since the 1970s changed our Catholic schools into agents for undermining of Faith. Our Catholic schools urgently need new authentic Catholic religion programmes, which could initially be sourced from another country.

New authentic Catholic programmes would greatly help parents to participate in teaching of their children, and benefit their own Faith. Teacher training should be renewed in line with the new school programmes.

All the faithful have a part to play in renewal of Catechesis – bishops, clergy, religious, laity including parents/grandparents, teachers, catechists, and others. Pope Francis’ recent establishment of the lay ministry of Catechist (*Antiquum Ministerium 2021*) could make a significant contribution. Lay movements and associations should develop further their significant contributions to orthodox Catholic teaching. Preaching of the clergy should be renewed, assisted by the Holy See’s 2015 *Homiletic Directory*.

The Church recommends that renewal should start with a comprehensive objective Analysis of the Catechetical Situation, leading to formulation of a Programme of Action, led by our Bishops. The Bishops’ Conference should establish a Commission for Evangelisation with responsibilities to include Catechesis and Catholic Education – the Catechetics Council should revert to the former practice of Bishops only as members; experts can be advisors.

## **A selection of references relevant to Catechesis**

Jesus said: Go, therefore, make disciples of all nations; baptize them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teach them to observe all that I have commanded you.  
*Matthew 28:19-20.*

Evangelizing is the essential mission of the Church, ... her deepest identity. She exists in order to evangelize. ... A means of evangelisation which must not be neglected is catechetical instruction.  
Pope St Paul VI. *Evangelii Nuntiandi* 14,44.

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the first & greatest commandment. The second is like it: you shall love your neighbour as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law & the Prophets (the Old Testament).  
*Matthew 22:37-40. (Deuteronomy 6:5; Leviticus 19:18).*

God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. ... I give you a new commandment: love one another just as I have loved you.  
*John 3:16, 13:34.*

They will not believe in Jesus unless they have heard of him, and they will not hear of him unless they get a preacher. *Romans 10:14.*

Jesus said: 'Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs'. *Matthew 19:14.*

Sacred tradition, sacred Scripture and the teaching authority of the Church, are so joined that one cannot stand without the others. *Vatican Council II. Dei Verbum 10*

In drawing up catechisms, the following two criteria must be carefully adhered to:

- (a) perfect harmony with the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*.
- (b) due consideration for the norms and criteria for the presentation of the Gospel message in the *General Directory for Catechesis*. *General Directory for Catechesis 284*

Bishops succeed the Apostles, ..... they are to be teachers of doctrine, priests of sacred worship, and ministers of governance. *Code of Canon Law 375 §1*

Dearly beloved brother Bishops,... You are beyond all others the ones primarily responsible for catechesis, the catechists *par excellence*. ... Let the concern to foster active and effective catechesis yield to no other care whatever in any way. ... Maintain a passion for catechesis. ....Although your zeal must sometimes impose on you the thankless task of denouncing deviations and correcting errors, it will much more often win for you the joy and consolation of seeing your Churches flourishing because catechesis is given in them as the Lord wishes.

Pope St John Paul II, *Catechesi Tradendae* 63.

It must be humbly & honestly recognized that this rich flowering has brought with it articles and publications which are ambiguous and harmful. .... Certain catechetical works bewilder the young and even adults, either by deliberately or unconsciously omitting elements essential to the Church's faith, or by attributing excessive importance to certain themes at the expense of others, or, chiefly, by a rather horizontalist overall view out of keeping with the teaching of the Church's magisterium.

Pope St John Paul II, *Catechesi Tradendae* 49