



# Catechizing in an Age of Scandals

By Pat Gohn

*Tips for being prepared*

**Y**ou are an important witness for Christ amidst Church scandals. As accounts unfold regarding the horrific sexual abuse of minors and others – and corruptions within the hierarchy create confusion and anger – we find ourselves catechizing and serving our parishes and schools within potentially negative and challenging situations.

We've reached out to several catechists and catechetical leaders who write for our magazine and website. Below you'll find their thoughtful suggestions for how we might serve the Church now and in the days to come. Almost all of them offered some version of what David Dzienna suggests: "Keep your own faith life in check. Make sure you are filled spiritually before you minister to others."

## Look to Christ

### Take time for prayer daily.

Express your own feelings, even the most negative ones, to Jesus in prayer. Never forget that Jesus is both human and divine and can understand the depths of our emotions – even hurt, disillusionment, anger, or fear. Sr. Lou Ella Hickman writes: "Remember, the Church has had a long history of betrayals. Sit in silence for a while with Jesus. ... He is hurting, too. It is important to remember that when Jesus cried out, *'My God, why have You forsaken Me?'* that was the moment of his greatest solidarity with humanity."

Prayer will help us be ready to meet with others, as Kathy Hendricks explains: "As with all catechetical preparation, it is vital to begin with prayer. We need to [consider] our own emotions around these revelations and the pain that the entire Church feels over them. In doing so, we can ask God to help us let go of our own opinions and remain open to the various reactions we are likely to encounter."

Struggling to find the words to pray? Try praying the Rosary, the Chaplet of Divine Mercy, or the Divine Office.

### Keep the Eucharist central, and go to Mass as often as you can.

Recall the Lord's oneness with us. This is most profound in the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist, where "*the whole Christ is truly, really, and substantially contained*" – body and blood, soul and divinity (see *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1374).

Visit an Adoration chapel. Susie Lloyd offers this reminder: "Honor Jesus in the Holy Eucharist, and he will give you everything you need to teach the kids."

### Pray for victims and all who suffer the effects of abuse.

William O'Leary describes the efficacy of our prayers: "We have to live ... the Gospel in word and deed. We should not only offer prayers but also make acts of penance and offerings to Christ that he may bring comfort, healing, and hope to the victims, as well as to all those who have been affected by the sins of abuse."

Virginia Lieto writes, "Through prayer, for both the perpetrators and those in power who failed us, and for the victims, we can make positive change."

### Seek quiet.

Hendricks offers good advice: "Be mindful of consuming too much media around the scandals. ... This isn't to say we should hide our heads in the sand, but it becomes overkill after a while. Set aside screen-free times in order to listen to music, read an inspirational book or magazine article, spend time with a child or friend, go for a walk, or simply sit in quiet."

**"I am with you always, until the end of the age." – Matthew 28:20**

## Prepare to meet the reactions of others

### Do your homework.

Try not to get overwhelmed with the wealth of reporting and commentary from news outlets and social media. Get the facts. Be willing to wait for ongoing stories to be further investigated. Cathryn Torgerson says, “Read insights from multiple sources and viewpoints to get a broad perspective of what others might be encountering.”

Ask your catechetical leader, pastor, or principal for any information that is being distributed that might assist ministry teams.

David Dzienna writes: “Read your diocesan bishop’s statement, the USCCB statements, and anything the pope releases related to the recent scandals. It is important to be informed of what is truly being said and done. Don’t just rely on news sound bites or headlines.”

### Be empathetic and listen.

Keep in mind the ages and innocence of children. While this subject may never surface in class with the youngest ones, we have to be ready. Always speak in an age-appropriate manner. If this comes up unexpectedly, be sure to mention it to your catechetical leader or principal. Parents might need to be notified regarding these subjects if discussed in a younger-aged class.

You’ll most likely encounter this subject with teens and adults. Consider that people may have different reactions based on familiarity with the news. For some, learning of these reports for the first time may bring an experience of shock. Others are filled with a sense of distrust toward Church leadership.

Hendricks advises, “Take time to listen to people and let them know you care about their feelings and experiences.” Dzienna also adds, “Allow for questions. Do not pretend this isn’t happening. There are some things that have happened that are indefensible, so say that.”

O’Leary writes, “Acknowledge the horror, immorality, and devastation that has occurred. Much of what has been revealed is appalling and heartbreaking for the victims.” Hendricks cautions: “Some will

be angry and demand answers; others will deny the whole thing and question why we can’t just move on. It is vital to hold a space for all emotions without judgment or avoidance.”

### Be sensitive to those who may have been victimized.

For some, news accounts of abuses may trigger memories of past sexual abuse. It might have taken place at church, home, school, or other places. Hendricks reminds us: “It’s vital to be aware of parish and diocesan resources that will assist anyone who comes forward with a story about their own abuse. Talk to your catechetical leader about how best to handle such situations and where to refer people for help.”

**PRO TIP:** Every diocese has response guidelines for when a person comes forth with an accusation of abuse. Be sure you know which authorities must be contacted and take action immediately.

Catechetical leaders: Look for resources to bring to your parish about recognizing signs of abuse and responding to them.

## Truth, beauty, and goodness still exist – thanks to our faith

### God is still with us.

Torgerson notes the importance of expressing your own faith with “joy, truth, and the love of Jesus, and being able to explain why you will stay a Catholic.”

God is our source of hope amidst difficulties. “Focus on the truths of the faith ... not on any one person. People may disappoint, but God will never let us down,” says Dzienna.

Look for the good in your surroundings and within your catechetical mission. Hendricks suggests: “Pay close attention to the small acts of kindness and generosity taking place in your parish or school each day. We are quick to notice when something goes awry, but it takes time and intention to see the everyday encounters of grace and goodness. Start a gratitude journal and log these encounters each day. Include something you have done in your role as a catechist to contribute to the vision of the kingdom that Jesus preached.”

### The Church has endured scandals before.

O’Leary points to the courageous faith of others: “There are many faithful priests who have given their

**Catechist.com** has a roundup of resources to read at [CATmag.us/2QftER8](http://CATmag.us/2QftER8).

lives for the sake of the Gospel. The truths of the faith remain Good News. The scandals don't change that."

Susie Lloyd writes: "There are many examples of clerics who used their offices as a cloak for malice. Our Lord warned about wolves among the sheep. But when [the abuse of authority occurs], Our Lord raises up saints and truth tellers and strong leaders who courageously do his will."

James Blankenship reminds us of the ultimate scandal — the scandal of the cross — that Christ endured for our sins: "Remember that the scandal of the cross had to happen before Christ rose gloriously on Easter Sunday. Good Friday was a pretty dark day. Peter, the prince of the apostles, denied Christ. Judas betrayed Christ. All the apostles, except John, abandoned Christ. ... But the Lord did rise to conquer death and sin, and so he will do it again in his mystical body, the Church."

### Invoke Mary and the saints to assist us in spiritual battle.

Blankenship encourages all catechists: "Stay in the state of grace. ... We are clearly witnessing the spiritual battle rage before our eyes. Through Our Lady's intercession, the evil and sin currently on display in the Church will be conquered."

Hendricks says, "Take heart from saints who lived through scandalous times in the Church, such as Teresa of Avila. ... They didn't let the negative aspects of the Church overshadow the goodness of the People of God. Nor did they give up hope in a God who abides with us despite our failed attempts at love and justice."

### Don't forget about the positive changes the Church has already made to prevent abuse.

Dziena says, "The Church has done much to protect children in recent years, and all of the current scandals can lead to stronger protection over time. We must root out all of the problems before things will get better. It is important to pray for our faithful clergy and support them."

Torgerson continues: "Know that many changes have been put into place regarding seminarian formation. ... I also heard a priest interviewed on the radio recently who was ordained this year. He talked about the lengthy process of being admitted to seminary and how that evaluation continues all through their formation."

### Hope centers our faithful mission.

Virginia Lieto says, "Shining a light on the sin will be the best disinfectant. We all need to face objective truth and deal with the consequences. ... Finally, we need to remember that Jesus promised, "I am with you always, until the end of the age"

(Matthew 28:20). He's there for us, even in these rocky times."

"People may disappoint, but God will never let us down." — David Dziena



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