

Building a Better Catechist Formation Workshop

Jonathan F. Sullivan



In the fall of 2011, our diocesan Office for Catechesis, in cooperation with our Office for Worship and the Catechumenate, sponsored a series of regional workshops helping Catholic school teachers and parish catechists to understand the (then) upcoming implementation of the *Roman Missal, Third Edition*, examine the changes in the English translation, and prepare the faithful to embrace these changes through their catechetical programs.

We knew that this would be a challenging workshop, due to both the inherent pain and grieving many people experience when their mode of worship is altered, and a history of poor reception of such large, regional workshops. With those considerations in mind, we made a conscious effort to change our approach from past workshops.

1. **We dumped the single-speaker approach.** In the past, we hired individual presenters to lead our regional catechist workshops. This year, because we increased the number of workshops and spread them out over the course of six weeks, hiring a single presenter from outside the diocese didn't make logistical sense. Instead, the members of the sponsoring offices took responsibility for pieces of the workshop. As a result, participants heard from five different people over the course of the session.
2. **We kept things moving.** At three hours long, the workshop could have dragged on for participants. Instead, we broke down the agenda for the workshop and intentionally kept the individual sections short and to the point. No individual section was longer than 30 minutes and some were as short as five minutes long. Combined with the multiple speakers, participants were always being presented with something new to hold their interest.
3. **We utilized interactivity and multimedia.** To help participants come together as a group, we began the workshop with a 15-minute Liturgy of the Word. We also had a reflect/pair/share exercise early in the session and presenters asked feedback questions throughout the

workshop. In addition, besides using traditional PowerPoint slides, we played short clips from ICEL's *Become One Body, One Spirit in Christ* DVD in between major agenda items to either highlight ideas from the preceding presenter or to set up the next one. These short clips gave participants an opportunity to stand and stretch or just "reset" before the next part of the workshop.

4. **We eliminated technological variables.** As we went around our diocese, we brought our own laptops and projector. Even more importantly we invested in a portable PA system that allowed us to forgo using unreliable and outdated sound systems in the parishes. This ensured that, regardless of the setting or size of the room, participants were always able to hear the presenters clearly.
5. **We gave them resources to use.** In the past, the biggest criticism of our formation workshops was a lack of resources to "take back to the classroom." This was especially true of school teachers, but parish catechists also expressed a desire to have relevant materials that they could take back and use in their programs. Because we didn't hire a presenter, our budget allowed us to purchase booklets and other materials to give to catechists to take back with them. These were handed out in folders by grade level (K-6 or 7-12).

*In the past,
the biggest criticism
of our formation workshops
was a lack of resources
to "take back to the classroom."*

Implementing these changes meant working outside our established patterns, but in the end, it made for a more effective and engaging catechist formation experience. Our future workshops will build on and refine this model. ■

Jonathan F. Sullivan is the director of catechetical ministries for the Diocese of Springfield in Illinois. He blogs regularly on catechetical topics at JonathanFSullivan.com.