

Methods and Class Management: Asking Good Questions

Few things are more frustrating for a religion teacher than asking a question and just receiving a one word answer as a response, or even worse, getting no response—just silence or shrugged shoulders. Many religion teachers have said: “I just can’t get students to talk. What can I do?” First, look at the question, and how it was asked. Perhaps the question was too difficult or not asked clearly. At other times, it may be that the question intimidated the students. For example, to ask, “Who can name the Ten Commandments or the Seven Sacraments in order?” might not get the same response as asking the class to name them as you write them in order on the board or chart paper. This method will also help review the material for some and provide reinforcement for those who are visual learners. It also encourages participation by more than one student at the same time, because you are inviting the class to respond together.

The art of asking good questions that encourage a response is a learned skill. Asking the right questions in the right way, will engage students. In catechetics, we use questioning to gather information, review, discuss, and evaluate.

When we only want facts, we ask questions that have a factually correct answer, such as, “What did you get for Christmas?” or “Where was Jesus born?” This type of questioning begins with the words *who, what, when, where, and how*. Use this type of questioning to get information you need, or to check whether students have learned factual material, such as, “Whose image are we created in?” Factual questions can also elicit complex answers, such as answer to, “What is the purpose of God’s creation?” It is a factual question, but it requires a more complex answer than the first question.

Questions are a natural part of our conversations. They help us exchange information and clarify the meaning of the exchange. *Closed questions* require a one or two-word response or just a nod of the head. Closed questions also tend to have right or wrong answers. Once a student has answered a closed question, there is not much more to say. A question that requires only a “yes” or “no” can be a conversation-stopper. *Open-ended questions* engage students in story telling, discussion, and conversation.

The question “What is the color for Advent?” evokes a one-word answer. But an open-ended question, such as, “Tell me about a time you had to wait for something” encourages a student to describe their experience and will lead to a discussion on the meaning of Advent. There is no right or wrong answer here. An answer to an open-ended question helps the catechist understand how a student is appropriating and understanding what has been or will be presented. It helps the student express how he or she is thinking or feeling. The responses of students in these situations are often amazing and grace-filled and may lead to extended conversation.

Open-ended questions have many possible answers. They invite students to think and solve problems. As students express their ideas, they learn to participate in the back-and-forth flow of conversation, which also builds community in the classroom. Here are some examples:

- What do you think will happen next?
- What would happen if...?
- I wonder...?
- What do you suppose...?

- In what way...?
- How did that happen...?
- What do you think...?
- Tell me about...?
- What would you do...?
- How can we...?
- How did you...?

It can be difficult to change the habit of asking only closed questions, but when we ask open-ended questions, students reap great benefits as they think through their responses to express what they want to say. Their answers reveal their feelings and understanding of the subject.

Open-ended questions:

- don't demand a response
- don't have right or wrong answers
- encourage thinking and problem-solving
- ask students to use their imaginations