

## Methods and Class Management: Asking Good Questions

There is nothing more frustrating for a catechist than asking a question and not getting a response or asking a question and just receiving a one word answer as a response, or in the worst case, no response—just silence or shrugged shoulders. Many catechists have been heard to say: “I just can’t get the children to talk. What can I do?” First, look at the question and how you asked it. Perhaps it was too difficult, or you did not ask the question clearly. At other times it may be that the question intimidated the young people. 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 group to name them as you write them in order on the board or chart paper. That method will also help review the material for some and reinforce it for those who are visual learners.

The art of asking good questions that encourage a response is a skill that can be learned. Ask the right questions in the right way, and children will be engaged. 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?” These kinds of questions begin with the words *who, what, when, how and where*. Use these kinds of questions to get information you need, or to check whether children have learned factual material, such as, “Whose image are we created in?” However, factual questions can also elicit more complex answers, such as the question, “What is the purpose of God’s creation?” It is a factual question, but it requires a more complicated answer than the first question.

Questions are a natural part of our conversations. They help us exchange information and clarify what is being said. 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 child has answered a closed question, there is really not much more to say. The discussion or conversation-stopper is the question that requires only a yes or no. Open-ended questions engage children in story-telling, discussion, and conversation.

A question like “What is the color for Advent?” evokes a one-word answer. But an open-ended question, “Tell me about an experience of waiting” encourages a child 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 child is appropriating and understanding what has been or will be presented. It helps the child express how he or she is thinking or feeling. The responses of children in these situations are often amazing and grace-filled. Often they lead to extended conversation.

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

- What do you think will happen now?
- 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 is difficult to change the closed-ended question habit. But when we ask open-ended questions, children reap great benefits as they think through their responses to express what they want to say. And with their answers, we find out more about what they think and feel.

Open-ended questions:

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