



Parents and Families at the Center of Faith Formation 2024-2028

National Community of Catechetical Leaders (NCCL)

A Lilly Endowment Christian Parenting and Caregiver Funded Program

John Roberto, NCCL Executive Director and Project Director (jroberto@lifelongfaith.com)
<https://www.ncclcatholic.org>

Purpose

NCCL's *Parents and Families at the Center of Faith Formation Project* is a five-year grant-funded project that will work directly with 200 Catholic parishes in 20 cohorts across the United States and engage over 30,000 Catholic parents and their families by exploring how to strengthen faith transmission at home in the first two decades of life, and create parish communities that intentionally accompany and support parents and the whole family.

The prevailing model of Catholic parish faith formation (catechesis) for children and adolescents is not adequate for the task of faith transmission and formation today. The current model of weekly, age-graded classes or programs at church involves only 20-30 hours of faith formation annually. It is a model that makes parents/caregivers and the family peripheral to faith transmission and formation, while assuming and relying upon faith practice at home and the participation of the family in Catholic parish life, especially Sunday Mass. Participation of young people and their parents/caregivers in Sunday Mass and parish-based classes and programs has been on the decline for over a decade, a decline that has only accelerated in the post-pandemic Catholic parish. The old model of children and adolescent formation is no longer adequate for the new context of forming faith. Catholic parishes need new models of faith formation that fully engage parents/caregivers in faith transmission and make the home central to faith practice and formation.

NCCL's *Parents and Families at the Center of Faith Formation Project* will establish a solid foundation of knowledge about how faith transmission is (or is not) being practiced in Catholic families so that new approaches and strategies can be designed that are reflective of the family research and current thinking on faith transmission. The Project seeks to build on how Catholic families are already transmitting faith and values so that new approaches and strategies support parents. The new approaches and strategies will be developmentally appropriate, culturally responsive, personalized to diverse parental religiosities, and responsive to diverse family structures.

NCCL's *Parents and Families at the Center of Faith Formation Project* will guide parish leaders in strengthening the parish community to accompany parents and the family in forming faith; and in designing a seamless approach to faith formation from birth through high school graduation by addressing the unique developmental and faith growth needs of young children, grade school children, young adolescents, and older adolescents. New resources and approaches will be created to guide parish communities in accompanying parents and developing a seamless approach to faith forming at home and in the parish community.

NCCL's *Parents and Families at the Center of Faith Formation Project* will create new approaches to:

- *Encourage* parents/caregivers to grow in the Catholic faith as adults
- *Equip* parents/caregivers to *build* families that live Christian practices at home and in the world
- *Engage* parents/caregivers in learning how to become faith formers of their children and teens
- *Involve* the whole family in faith forming experiences and programs in the parish community
- *Connect* families with the other generations in the parish community through intergenerational faith forming experiences

NCCL's *Parents and Families at the Center of Faith Formation Project* will create new approaches that are:

- *Contextual* – to the unique needs of parents and families in a parish community
- *Developmentally appropriate* – to the four stages of young children, grade school children, middle school adolescents, and high school adolescents.
- *Culturally responsive* – to the ethnic backgrounds, traditions, and needs of parents and families
- *Personalized* - to the diverse religiosities and faith journeys of parents and families
- *Responsive* – to the diversity of family structures
- *Inclusive* – of families with children who have special needs and disabilities

Context

The prevailing model of Catholic parish faith formation (catechesis) for children and adolescents today was created in the 1970s. To this day it remains an age-graded, classroom-based (with textbooks), church-centered model that begins in grade one and concludes with Confirmation in the teen years. This 20-30 hour per year education model relies upon faith practice at home and participation of the family in Catholic parish life, especially Sunday Mass. It is a one-size-fits-all approach to learning and formation that does not address the dramatic changes in the lives of parents and young people today or the changes in society, culture, and technology over the last ten-fifteen years. It is a faith formation model that makes parents/caregivers and the family secondary to what is happening in the parish program. The context for catechesis is dramatically different today than it was in the 1970s. The conditions necessary to maintain the older model no longer hold true. Three trends illustrate the challenges to faith formation in the new context.

1. Increasing diversity in family life today. There is a *diversity of family structures* in the United States including households with two parents (original and blended families), single parents, adoptive families, foster parents, grandparents raising grandchild, two moms, two dads, and caregivers fulfilling parenting roles. There is *social and cultural diversity* with families of diverse nationalities, ethnic traditions, language groups, and economic status. There is *gender diversity* with LGBTQ parents and children. There is *generational diversity* with children, parents, and grandparents from different generational experiences.

2. Declining levels of Catholic participation: The church statistics compiled by the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA) document the dramatic demographic changes in participation in parish life and Sunday Mass.

- In 1970 almost 54.9% of Catholics attended Mass weekly. By 2021 that number had dropped to 17.3% - a decline of over 66%. In 1970, 71.3% of Catholics attended Mass at least once a month. By 2021 that number had dropped to 36.6% - a 50% decline.

- Since 1990 the Catholic church has seen the number of marriages drop by 66%, baptisms and first communions drop by 50%, and confirmations by 20%, even as the Catholic population in the U.S. grew by 20 million people from 1970 to the present.
- The number of children in parish religious education programs dropped from 4.2 million in 1970 to 1.8 million in 2021. The number of high school age teens in parish religious education and youth ministry dropped from 1.3 million in 1970 to 550,000 in 2021.

3. Increasing diversity of religiosities and disaffiliation. The parents of children and teens today reflect a greater diversity of religiosities: *active and engaged believers, involved believers, spiritual not religious, inactive believers, and inactive nonbelievers*. More children and teens are growing up in homes where their parents, who may have been baptized and celebrated First Eucharist and even Confirmation, no longer practice their Catholic faith or no longer participate in a parish (or any other religious congregation) or no longer believe that religion and God are important in their lives. Even active and engaged believers often lack fluency with the Catholic faith tradition and the confidence and ability to share it with their children.

The increasing diversity in religiosities and practice and the trend toward disaffiliation from the Catholic Church is leading to the dramatic rise in the number of children growing up in religiously unaffiliated homes where parents are not transmitting a religious faith and practicing it at home. They are raising their children to become the second generation of not religiously affiliated. If these trends continue, we can forecast declining levels of the importance of religion and the Catholic faith, faith practice at home, and participation of families in Catholic parish life.

Vision

NCCL's *Parents and Families at the Center of Faith Formation Project* recognizes that parents/caregivers and the family are the most powerful influences for virtually every child and youth outcome—personal, academic, social, and spiritual-religious; and that parents are the most important influence on the social and religious lives of children, youth, and emerging adults. Given the central role of parents/caregivers and families in shaping the lives of children and youth, they need to be at the center of faith formation.

NCCL's *Parents and Families at the Center of Faith Formation Project* is guided by a set of convictions about the importance of parents/caregivers and the family in faith formation:

- We believe the family is the first community and the most basic way in which God gathers us, forms us, and acts in the world. The family is the essential and foundational environment for faith nurture, faith practice, and the healthy development of young people. We know from research studies, that the family is the primary way by which Christian identity becomes rooted in the lives of young people through day-to-day religious practices.
- We believe parents are the most significant influence shaping the religious and spiritual lives of children and youth. We believe that the single most powerful force in a child's religious formation is the spiritual personality of the parent. We know from research studies that the parental factors that make a significant difference in promoting faith in children and youth include the personal faith and practice of parents and caregivers, and a close, warm, nurturing parent-child relationship.
- We believe, as research studies have found, that the primary ways by which a religious identity becomes rooted in children's lives are the day-to-day religious practices of the family and the ways parents model their faith and share it. The primary responsibility for passing on religious faith and practice to children rests with parents and caregivers. Religious congregations primarily serve to

provide support and encouragement by developing healthy partnerships with parents and caregivers.

- We believe the quality of parents' relationships with their young people and the parenting style they practice make a significant difference in faith transmission. We know from research studies that parents and caregivers who cultivate relationships of warmth and love make everything else possible. We know that a parenting style that sets religious expectations for children, with flexibility, and that focuses more on listening, and less on preaching, makes a huge difference in faith transmission. These parent and caregiver qualities are conducive to parents and caregivers talking with their children about faith, practice, and religious matters. It's about living into the faith rather than passing on the faith.

Major Project Elements 2024-2028

NCCL's *Parents and Families at the Center of Faith Formation Project* will undertake the following activities over the five years of the project.

1. Conduct a review of the current literature on faith transmission and the role of parents and the family in forming the faith of children and teens.
2. Invite several experts on family and religious transmission to prepare papers summarizing the key research and thinking.
3. Employ CARA (Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate) to conduct quantitative and qualitative research on how Catholic families engage in faith transmission today.
4. Develop a team of Consultants to work with 20 cohorts of 10 parishes as facilitators of the process that guides parish teams in designing and implementing a parish model from birth through high school graduation of parent/caregiver enrichment, family faith practice at home, and family faith formation at church.
5. Select up to 20 Catholic (Arch)Dioceses to participate in the Project and develop 20 cohorts of 10 parishes that reflect geographic diversity, ethnic diversity (monocultural or multicultural parish), socio-economic diversity, and location diversity (urban, suburban, rural and small town, military base community).
6. Conduct a Summit on Faith Transmission from August 12-14, 2024 in Chicago to analyze the CARA Report of the quantitative and qualitative findings, to reflect on the papers prepared by the family experts, and to develop practical implications for faith transmission in the first two decades of life – for parents, for the family, and for the parish.
7. Work with the cohorts of parishes to create a three-year plan for implementing new approaches in faith formation guided the research and current thinking (2025); work with parishes to evaluate, improve, and sustain Year One initiatives and design and implement Year Two initiatives (2026); and work with parishes to evaluate, improve, and sustain Year One and Two initiatives and design and implement Year Three initiatives.