

# The Hierarchy of Truths: The Golden Threads of Catechesis

by Emily “Em” Teter

Whether it’s through using a Milky Way bar to teach the Trinity, figuring out the best way to teach the importance of Confirmation, or challenging teens to look at Christ’s Passion as the basis of our lives, the primary task of a Director of Youth Ministry (DYM) is passing on our faith. We are each called to pass down the faith that we have learned to young people. In order to have a comprehensive youth ministry program, we must incorporate purposeful catechesis into our meetings with youth (*Renewing the Vision*). This catechesis is at the very heart of youth ministry and really, why youth ministry exists: to pass on the very person of Jesus Christ.

Where to start in regards to catechesis with young people can be very daunting. With so many essential concepts, doctrines, and dogmas in our Church it can often cause one’s head to spin. The truths of our faith have a hierarchal system to them. They are not meant to be some random occurrence of happenstance, but instead something that makes sense, and that works in a systematic order.

All catechesis is meant to be both systematic and organic (General Directory for Catechesis). This means that catechesis is meant to follow a particular order, to be unified and to make sense. Additionally, the organic nature of catechesis shows us that we are not called to teach merely concepts or facts, but that of the life of Jesus Christ: a living, breathing person who enlightens everything that we know and believe. Systematic catechesis helps to uphold a young person’s dignity by allowing them the ability to learn our faith in a way that makes sense and that will help them see how teachings are related to one another.

The Hierarchy of Truths, also commonly referred to as the golden threads of catechesis, is a helpful way to see how we can come to understand our faith. These truths are the very basic tenets of our faith. Every teaching of our faith in some way comes down to one of the five topics listed below. It is important to understand that this list is not meant to say that some teachings are less real or less true than others; it simply means that these truths are foundational to the understanding of our faith. They illuminate other truths of our faith, and they connect doctrines to each other, which helps us to see their unity.

## The Hierarchy of Truths

1. **The Trinity:** This is the most essential truth of our faith. Without it, no other truths make sense. The Trinity **MUST** be taught in every doctrine.
2. **The Incarnation:** Christ is the center of the world. All catechesis should be Christocentric (*Catechesi Tradendae* 5). Everything we teach is connected to who Christ is and what Christ continues to do.
3. **The Paschal Mystery:** All that Christ is, culminates in the Paschal Mystery. The Paschal Mystery is the passion, death, resurrection, and ascension of our Lord.
4. **The Church as the dispenser of mysteries (sacraments):** This teaches of the importance of the Church, most especially in light of the sacraments.
5. **The Church as the mystical body of Christ/Human Dignity:** Because God is a communion of persons, we too participate in the Body of Christ. Human dignity plays a role here in the fact that we image God and the Trinity as a communion of persons, so we as the Body of Christ image this community of persons.

When we catechize, we are teaching these basic truths of our faith, while at the same time going deeper. Each of these truths is the basic building block to the doctrines we teach. They have to be taught in a progressive order and in a systematic way that connects a doctrine to this basic truth. For example, teens cannot understand why abortion is wrong if they first are not taught about human dignity. However, they cannot learn about human dignity until they understand the Trinity, etc.

Think of catechesis as a spiral. The very root of that spiral is these truths, but each year with our young people, we delve deeper into one of these truths. This is not to say that we simply teach these five things over and over again, but that everything that a Director of Youth Ministry teaches is based on these concepts. For instance, if you were teaching young people and you wanted to explain the dangers of relativism, it should be rooted in the Trinity, although it might not be obviously directed to the Trinity. Everything that we believe in some way relates back to this hierarchy. We need to be making these connections for the teens that we work with. I would encourage all DYMs to think about this as they are planning a lesson with their teens. It is actually a very fun challenge; I dare you to find a teaching that doesn't fall into one of these categories (I sure haven't!).

In my own youth ministry, I have found that by connecting different teachings back to these fundamental truths, my teens are internalizing their faith. This is key to the formation of teens who will stay Catholic beyond the life of a particular youth ministry program.



For more information on the hierarchy of truths and catechesis with young people, you may want to review the following resources:

1. [Catechesi Tradendae \(“On Catechesis in our Time”\)](#). This document is written by the late Pope St. John Paul II. It is one of the premier documents on catechesis in our Church.
2. [The General Directory for Catechesis](#). This book, put out by the Congregation for the Clergy is a MUST HAVE for all DYMs. It is meant to present the context and content of catechesis.
3. [The National Directory for Catechesis](#). This book, produced by the USCCB, goes along with the General Directory for Catechesis as its companion. It is a reference point for forming catechists, developing resources as well as providing practical application.
4. [The Association for Catechumenal Ministry](#) produces an [RCIA catechist’s manual](#) that is stellar. This manual gives the breakdown of essential information to teach approximately fifty doctrines. Because its intended audience is those in the RCIA process, its instruction is basic and very simple to understand. I use this as a starting point for doctrines that are often tricky to teach.
5. [The Catechism of the Catholic Church and the Craft of Catechesis](#). This book goes deeper into the Hierarchy of Truths and the different pedagogies in catechesis.

\*\*Much of the information above on the Hierarchy of Truths comes from lectures from Professor Scott Sollom at Franciscan University of Steubenville.\*\*

*Emily “Em” Teter is the Director of Social Justice at the Academy of the Holy Cross in Kensington, MD. She has an MA in Theology and Christian Ministry with a specialization in Catechetics from Franciscan University of*

*Steubenville. You can typically find Em volunteering for the diocese filling water coolers or making coffee, creating a well-made binder for all sorts of activities and laughing far too loud at really corny jokes. She has a passion for journeying with young people and loves coming up with creative ways to lead them to Christ. She's married to her best friend Erik and they have a daughter, Belle.*