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Modern catechists 'must be creatively faithful'

by Catholic News Service



Mark Nimo shares laughs with teenagers at St. Hyacinth Basilica in Chicago during a 2008 youth day rally that included entertainment, music, multilingual catechetical sessions and a Mass. (CNS/Karen Callaway)

LAS VEGAS -- As the church looks to the future it must increase the number of "culturally diverse, adequately formed, committed and, above all, creatively faithful catechists," said a keynote speaker at a conference in Las Vegas for catechetical leaders.

"While God does the harvesting, we must do what we can to really assure that the seed is being planted," said Jesuit Fr. Allan Figueroa Deck, executive director of the Secretariat of Cultural Diversity for the U.S. Catholic bishops' conference. His talk opened an April 19-22 conference sponsored by the National Conference for Catechetical Leadership.

Deck praised catechists for their work and described them as the "largest, most tested and recognized cohort of lay leaders in the church."

He also said they were at the "front line of renewal" for the church and had an essential role to play in

?providing a vision for the entire church moving forward.?

In the U.S. church in particular, with its expanding cultural diversity, he said today?s catechists must be ?interculturally competent.?

He noted that the need for catechesis for Latinos has grown significantly, especially since Hispanics make up more than half of U.S. Catholics 35 and younger.

As he sees it, Hispanics who are ?properly catechized and formed have the potential to renew and enliven the church for decades to come? and church leaders need to double their efforts to ?nurture and affirm? Hispanics in the Catholic church and counter their flight to other faiths or away from organized religion.

The priest said the U.S. church has recently become more diverse. ?No longer can Hispanics, Asians, blacks or any other ministers see themselves as serving only ?their? communities,? he said. Instead, the dramatic diversity within parishes and dioceses ?demands that everyone develop a sense of responsibility for the whole church.?

Deck urged catechists to follow models set out by the late Cardinal Avery Dulles in his book *Evangelization for the Third Millennium*.

In the book, the cardinal stressed that catechists must be rooted in doctrine to clarify church teaching and make it as ?accessible as possible to everyone.? He also said catechists should encourage people to find God in the world and apply their faith to everyday situations.

Deck noted that these models of teaching work differently with Catholics who cover the gamut from those who are actively involved in the church to those who rarely attend and all the degrees in between.

To effectively reach all Catholics, the priest said modern catechists ?must be creatively faithful. This means being experts in the men and women, especially the youth and young adults, of our time with their hopes and aspirations, struggles, joys and sorrows.?

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He also said there simply needs to be more catechists, especially because of the ?aging and decline in the number of priests and religious.?

Catechists and teachers, he said, must be ?multiplied, adequately formed and authorized not to substitute for the priest or deacon ... but to work side by side in accomplishing the mission to evangelize.?

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