

## An In-depth Consideration of Religious Education Tuition Structure: Seeking to Evangelize While Justly Allocating the Cost Burden

By Tom Quinlan

How can a parish religious education program create an optimal tuition structure that generates increased revenue, does so with greater justice, and creates valuable opportunities for meaningful engagement with marginal families about the priority of faith and faith practice?

Because every parish is different and operates in a unique context, setting specific tuition policy broadly across our diocese is very difficult. What the following article attempts is to offer some practical suggestions that can benefit your parish program on this important topic.

Increasingly, parishes are ministering under a financial strain. Many finance councils are looking to parish catechetical ministry to increase revenue, cut costs or hold costs steady...in general to become a degree more self-sufficient. In some cases this may be possible and even appropriate. However, it is vital that those calling for a reduction in parish subsidy understand that catechetical ministry is not an option or a luxury. In fact, Canon Law declares that Catholic faith formation is a right of the faithful and an obligation on the part of every parish to provide.

While some parishes may have legitimate concern that its faith formation ministries should generate more revenue on their own behalf, a very substantial level of parish support is both necessary and proper. It is especially critical today that parishes accept and fulfill their responsibility to provide catechetical ministries to all its people today...including and especially, its adults. I am gratified that increasingly our parishes are gaining this recognition that evangelization/catechesis is a key component to stemming the decline in the numbers of active and practicing Catholic and strengthening the parish community.

From my experience in two dioceses and while serving on the NCCL board, I am inclined to think that many parishes could generate more revenue and in a more just manner. My primary suggestion is to create a two-tiered tuition structure. In such a system, the base tuition would likely go up, perhaps more than modestly. Then, those families who are active stewards of the parish are rewarded with a discount off of the base price. One might call this a “participating parishioner discount”. (Any parishes doing so would need to consider a wide set of variable in determining an appropriate base tuition adjustment.)

A criterion or a set of criteria would be established by the parish to allow for the delineation of families that would qualify for the “discount” from those that would not. As a parish DRE I found that the best wording to use was participating and non-participating to describe the difference between those who qualified for the discount and those who did not. This wording seemed the most clear and the least off-putting to parishioners in the parish I served.

In the example of the religious education program I led, parishioners qualifying for the reduced tuition rate paid roughly half of the normal, undiscounted rate, which was paid by non-qualifying parishioners, as well as those with (and wishing) no parish affiliation. The bottom line was that a greater burden was placed on families not active and supportive of the parish, resulting in an overall revenue increase. The cost to active, participating families was marginally reduced. This seemed more just for everyone.

A critically important ministerial point must be included here. A two-tiered tuition system such as this should be implemented only with the underpinning of a strong evangelizing/re-evangelizing spirit among parish leaders and a commitment to an intentional plan of outreach and invitation to all parishioner-families for whom the favorable tuition rate does not apply. I cannot stress this enough!

Every opportunity for communication, by letter, phone and in person, should be conducted with a generous pastoral tone. Parish leaders must take great pains to seize the opportunities created in such a tuition structure to gently explain both the rationale for the tuition structure and the broader context of active home and parish faith life which are necessary to the fostering of effective faith development in minors. I call these “re-evangelizing conversations”.

While this can be time and energy consuming for the parish catechetical leader, these interactions with parents can truly be fruitful moments of grace. As a DRE I learned how important these opportunities were and gave increasing emphasis to the inviting of families into greater relationship with the parish. There was nothing more important I could be doing that discussing the active practice of Catholic faith with non-participating parents.

One might think these conversations were strained. To the contrary, in almost all cases, parents were receptive to discussing the dynamics of their family’s faith practice, so long as I approached them in a gentle way and from a positive perspective. Many parents would make a commitment to begin to live up to the criteria established for receiving the lower tuition. I would grant the discount with enthusiasm but also with a word of accountability. If they failed to meet or surpass the criteria (in our case, the admittedly modest threshold...and imperfect gauge... of 26 parish envelopes per year) then the higher non-participating rate would apply and they would be billed for the additional amount.

The two-tiered system worked well insofar as it strengthened the revenue generation of the program. (And it allowed me better assist families with legitimate financial need.) But much more importantly, the system gave me, as DRE, many chances to try to re-evangelize our many, less churchgoing parents. The tuition structure highlighted the importance of active faith practice and caused a great many families to endeavor to become more active. Indeed, a fair number did!

Now, a very important point must be made about the criteria a parish may wish to use to establish participating parishioner status: Parishes may never name an amount of money contributed as a minimum threshold for gaining a participating status and, thus, a favorable rate for tuition. (To do so would violate IRS rules for tax-exempt institutions.) In other words, while I was able to set a minimum envelope usage as a criterion for families in the religious education program I directed, I could make no specific requirement as to the amount contributed. (I did often discuss with parents the importance of financial stewardship and the ways money is used to support the pastoral life of the parish.)

One further suggestion for increased revenue generation in a way that retains justice is to have multiple registrations deadlines from late spring through to early fall. After each deadline, an additional \$10 or so could be added to the tuition. In the system that I oversaw there were two deadlines, after which a slight increase occurred. Not only did this bring in a bit more money, but it encouraged parents to register earlier, which helped on the administrative end of the program. It was a win-win. (Families new to the parish were charged the pre-deadline amount.)

I want to also express my support for the concept of the “multiple child” discount, which many of our parishes have in place. It is a way of affirming and assisting families with two or more children by offering reduced rates of tuition after the first child. Again, this can only be done with full consideration given to the broader financial landscape of the catechetical program and the parish.

I hope my thoughts on the often touchy subject of “tuition” may be of some help, especially if you are in need of exploring new ways to provide financially for your program. What I have shared is meant mostly to help your parish begin to tackle the issue, not provide ready-made answers. I’d very much like you to share any thoughts or suggestions you have on this matter with me...so that I can possibly then share them with the entire catechetical community. As always, my email box is always open!

Beyond the particular matter of tuition and income generation, my greatest hope is that your parish will provide, proactively, the resources for excellent and effective adult faith formation and evangelization ministries, so that more and more adults (parents and others) will experience conversion in their faith lives and resume/begin a close relationship to Christ and the Church, and thus respond to the call to be generous stewards to the parish. This is, in the end, the only real and sustainable way to resolve the financial squeeze so many parishes struggle with today. All other solutions, including what I’ve addressed here, are mere short-term tinkering.