If Bishop John Lancaster Spalding of Peoria had lived long enough to see the vast numbers of lay and religious women receiving degrees in theology and religious education beginning in the 1950s and continuing today, he would have realized one of his most deeply held visions for the future of Catholic education in the United States. In 1964, a small, frail Sister of the Mission Helpers of the Sacred Heart received a Master of Arts degree in Theology from Fordham University at the age of sixty-eight. This moment was the culmination of a life lived in service of the catechetical mission to the Catholic children in this country who for one reason or another were unable to attend Catholic schools. Sister Mary Rosalia Walsh (1896-1982), along with her community that had been founded by James Cardinal Gibbons in 1890, ministered to poor immigrant and African-American non-Catholic school children in this country and later in Puerto Rico and Venezuela. As a result of their widely recognized and successful methods, thousands of children came to be catechized in their faith.

Scott Appleby, in an edited volume on the American Catholic intellectual tradition, defines intellectual traditions as “multi-generational arguments . . . about the nature of ‘the good’—that is about what constitutes ‘excellence’ in the practice of education, art, the sciences, theology, literature, cinema, philosophy, history, ecclesial life and so on” (2004, xx). The written records of the theory and development of catechetical methods in the U.S. and the manner in which catechists were trained to carry them out may be considered an
essential part of the American Catholic intellectual tradition. It might have surprised Sister Rosalia to find herself the subject of a chapter in this volume along with such notables as Bishop John Spalding, Edward Pace, Virgil Michel, and Jacques Maritain. However her long service and scholarship in the Catholic Church testify that she belongs. Her story is about living out the many facets of her vocation—writing, teaching children, training catechists, and studying the educational theories and methodologies of her time. Paradoxically, Sister Rosalia taught alongside learned professors in institutions of higher education while finding time to pursue her own studies only episodically.

Sister Walsh and the Mission Helpers of the Sacred Heart developed and shared their successful method under the title the Adaptive Way. Their story unfolds in the years of the transition of catechetical instruction from the age-old method of text-analysis and memorization to one of text explanation and presentation in light of the newly emerging field of educational psychology. The catechetical method of the Mission Helpers was based on principles developed in Europe, but was more deeply rooted in the Sisters’ practical catechetical experiences.

Three main streams of catechetical history converge in the study of the work and writings of Sister M. Rosalia Walsh. First, she was instrumental in the adaptation of new methods of catechetical instruction to the situation in the United States. Her long tenure of teaching children and her studies in psychology enabled her to usher into the field of catechetics the progressive ideas of secular education and educational psychology. Second, she was intensively involved in the development of catechetical materials for the Confraternity of Christian Doctrine (CCD) in the U.S. Sister Rosalia was the first Director of the Mission Helpers’ Department of Catechetics and was involved with development of teaching materials through the National Center of the CCD in Washington, D.C. for over twenty years (Spellacy 1984, 121). Third, she was responsible for increased awareness of the need for improving catechetical training in this country for religious and lay teachers alike. Her great concern for the careful preparation of members of her own community, other religious sisters, and lay catechists is evident in the detailed manuals she prepared, her efforts in conducting national workshops and training
sessions, and in her addresses at national catechetical congresses. In each of these three streams of catechetical history, Sister Rosalia emerged as a pioneer and leader, a woman in a field heavily populated by male clergy, and a humble servant of the non-school catechetical apostolate. She would take no personal credit for these achievements, seeking always to name the Mission Helpers as the community to which all these triumphs should be attributed.

Following a brief biographical overview of the life of Mary Rosalia (Josephine) Walsh, this chapter examines the key ideas that emerge from her work and writings. In both theory and practice, much of the thought of Sister Rosalia remain salient in Catholic religious education. The chapter concludes with a survey of the contributions of Sister Rosalia’s and the Mission Helpers’ of the Sacred Heart Catholic religious education in this country from 1924 to 1966. Over the course of these forty years, Sister Rosalia came to be so closely identified with the catechesis of non-Catholic school children that one was overheard to say at one of the congresses, “Sister Rosalia is the Confraternity” (Bryce 1985, 321).

Becoming a Teacher of Those Who Teach Religion

The Walshes of Cumberland, Maryland, were a large Catholic family, loyal participants in the life of the Church and dedicated to helping the immigrants of like faith who came to settle in their area of the country. Josephine, born April 26, 1896, was the fifth of nine children born to William E. and Mary Concannon Walsh, and one of four who would later dedicate their lives to the Church. William Walsh was a devoted Catholic who led his family in morning and night prayer at home in front of the images of the crucifix, the Sacred Heart of Jesus, and the Holy Family. Josephine Walsh attended St. Patrick’s grade school and high school. She was very bright and like her father, to whom she was devoted, loved to read (Spellacy 1984, 69-70).

William Walsh was president of the Saint Vincent de Paul Society at St. Patrick’s Church in Cumberland, Maryland. He was active in the work of addressing the needs of the poor. A lawyer by profession, he voluntarily traveled on weekends to minister to the needs of Italian, Polish, and German immigrants and their families. Josephine was
happy to accompany her father on such visits. No doubt those visits were instrumental in shaping her vocational dreams. William later expressed to the Mother Superior of his daughter’s religious congregation that he would be most happy to see all nine of children enter religious life. Josephine would not need much in the way of persuasion. She loved the opportunities to teach the catechism to the children of the families they visited. Later recalling the influence of her family on her decision to enter religious life, Sister Rosalia wrote:

My vocation was certainly fostered by the example of my parents who were exemplary Catholics and noted especially for their charity toward the poor. . . . My Father sometimes associated me with him in visiting the poor and the sick, and in catechetical work. From this, probably came my desire to enter a religious community devoted to work similar to that which my Father did as a Vincentian. I believe firmly that God called me to a congregation with these four characteristics:

1. The Sisters would visit people in their homes;
2. Teach religion to those not in Catholic schools;
3. There would be no lay Sisters, and
4. The Sisters would not visit their homes every year. . . .
The regularity . . . did not appeal to me. (AMHSH, Personal Recollections, 3)

Josephine Walsh entered the Congregation of the Mission Helpers of the Sacred Heart on January 5, 1916, at the age of nineteen. Her pedagogical gifts were soon recognized and she was soon given the opportunity to give lessons on the catechism. These lessons were written as they should be spoken to children and were then read to novices while Josephine, now Sister Mary Rosalia, was still a novice herself. Shortly after making her first vows (October 2, 1918), Rosalia was given her first mission to Staten Island, New York. Residing in New York City, she traveled on Sundays with other Mission Helpers to teach religion in kindergarten and to older children all week. Sister Rosalia recalled in writing the difficulty of starting a new mission and the lack of resources for their work. She
remained involved with the Staten Island mission until 1923 (Sister Rosalia’s personal notes, AMHSH).

The Mission Helpers of the Sacred Heart were concerned about furthering the education of their Sisters and in 1923 sent Sister Rosalia to the Fordham University School of Social Service. After completing one year of the two-year program, Rosalia developed a severe eye condition that threatened her ability to see. She was hospitalized and eventually lost all sight in one of her eyes. She was unable to complete the course of study, and returned to the motherhouse in Towson, Maryland, where she turned her efforts toward teaching in the Novitiate. Shortly thereafter Rosalia was chosen to organize and direct the congregation’s first Catechetical Department (Spellacy 1984, 113). While the Mission Helpers of the Sacred Heart had long been involved in the catechesis of children (their efforts were recognized as early as 1895), Sister Mary Rosalia Walsh would lead them into the catechetical renewal movement and in the preparation of teachers to carry it forth in the early decades of the twentieth century (Spellacy 1984, 71).

During the post-World War I period in the United States, Catholics were still struggling to assimilate into the culture. Having contributed heavily to the war effort, Catholics now focused their attention on national organizations to provide services for the growing numbers. The organization of catechetical ministry became the task of the National Catholic Welfare Conference (NCWC), which had been formed out of the National Catholic Warfare Conference when the war ended. The 1920s saw the rise of national efforts to educate the vast numbers of Catholic children who were not attending Catholic schools. Archbishop Edwin O’Hara was instrumental in the formation of the Catholic Rural Life Bureau, a branch of Catholic Social Action of the NCWC, which introduced correspondence courses in catechesis and religious vacation schools. By the 1930s, branches of the Confraternity of Christian Doctrine (CCD) began springing up all over the country and in 1935 the National Center of the CCD was formed as a bureau of the NCWC. Both the CCD and its National Center would impact the life and work of Sister Rosalia and the Mission Helpers of the Sacred Heart in the coming decades (Spellacy 1984, 77, 100 ff.).
In 1930, Rosalia studied the latest teaching methods in religion at Loyola College in Baltimore and enrolled in a correspondence course with Father Leo McVey through the Catholic University of America. While short of earning a degree, Sister Rosalia became immersed in both the study of methods in religious education and in how best to train catechists to use them. While studying and teaching in the motherhouse, Rosalia began to put into writing the method the Mission Helpers had been developing since their beginnings in the late years of the nineteenth century.

*Child Psychology and Religion* (Walsh 1937) became the community’s first published catechetical text and the first specifically designed for those involved in the Confraternity of Christian Doctrine (CCD). It was a compilation of talks given by Sister Rosalia on catechetical methodology for the purpose of educating lay and religious catechists who would be working with non-Catholic school students. The text was also later translated into Spanish (1941). Because few women were writing catechetical texts at the time, the publishers advised Sister Rosalia not to list her name as author. Instead, she humbly chose to call herself “A Teacher of Those Who Teach Religion.” The language of the text is easily understandable and the tone friendly and conversational. It is directed toward those who want to teach religion to the young but have no formal pedagogical training. It combined method and practice with some basic principles of educational and psychological theory. The topics include: prayer, apperception, catechesis in the home, the use of pictures and stories, class preparation and student motivation. The small volume of sixteen short lectures was well received and the name of the gifted author was soon commonly known in catechetical circles (Spellacy 1984, 119).

In 1937 Sister Rosalia also audited courses at the Catholic University of America with William Russell and Felix Kirsch in order to study the most current methods being used in religious education. It was also at this time that she first became associated with the National Center of the CCD (founded in 1935) and was named chairperson of the Teacher’s Division of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception. The appointment was providential. Spellacy said of it, “Rosalia’s association with the Center would last over twenty years and impact the entire catechetical movement in the United States” (1984,
Her work on revising the Center’s *The School Year Religious Instruction Manual* was among the most notable of her many efforts on behalf of the Center.

In 1938, Rosalia wrote *The Correspondence Course for Lay Catechists*, a text drawn from her talks in the summer Catholic lecture series at Cliff Haven, New York. These were her first public lectures outside her congregation. The correspondence course was commonly used as a means of disseminating catechetical materials across the country, including the most rural of areas. Toward the end of that year and into the next, Sister Rosalia worked on rewriting the methods text of the Mission Helpers. The sisters also envisioned a graded text and Sister Rosalia prepared two volumes, one for grades one through four and one for grades five through eight, for trial use. These were published as *The Adaptive Way Course of Religious Instruction for Catholic Children Attending Public Schools* in 1941. Six years later this work was in use in forty-four U.S. states, Puerto Rico, Hawaii, and fourteen foreign countries (Spellacy 1984, 123). In the spring of 1944, a rewrite of the method text appeared as *Teaching Confraternity Classes: The Adaptive Way*. Shortly thereafter Rosalia was invited to assist in the work on a three-volume religion course being prepared by the Maryknoll priests (1943-47). These were eventually published in 1947 under the title, *The Religion Teacher and the World*.

Sister Rosalia continued her untiring efforts in the field of catechetics throughout the decade of the 1950s. From 1939 to 1959, Rosalia’s writings were published by such distinguished journals as *The Journal of Religious Instruction, The Catholic Educator* and *Lumen Vitae* (Clement 2000, 61). Continually updating and revising teaching manuals for the Adaptive Way and her work at the National Center of the CCD occupied much of her time.

Rosalia taught summer methods courses at the Catholic University of America from 1947 to 1957 with such “well-known experts as Godfrey Diekmann, Gerald Ellard, S.J., Aloysius Heeg, S.J., Rudolph Bandas, and Joseph Collins” (Spellacy 1984, 180). From 1953 to 1961, she trained catechists through a mission at St. Paschal’s Convent in New York. She continued to write and publish catechetical manuals including one for vacation religious school and a new version of *The Adaptive Way* in 1955. From 1957 to 1958 Rosalia conducted an
advanced course in methods for training lay catechists at the request of Most Rev. Walter Curtis, Director of the CCD of the Archdiocese of Newark, New Jersey. Reorganization in 1948 and again in 1952 of the Catechetical Department of the Mission Helpers of the Sacred Heart shifted Sister Rosalia’s role from Director to Promoter to overseer of correspondence on a few manuals. These changes gradually reduced Rosalia’s “direct influence on the sisters and her contact with national leaders” (Spellacy 1984, 149).

The 1950s brought increased pressure for teacher certification and most colleges and universities required their instructors to have master’s degrees. In 1963, Rosalia completed work on a Master of Arts degree in theology at Fordham University. She was awarded the degree on February 1, 1964. Later that year, Sister Rosalia was reassigned to the motherhouse in Towson, Maryland. In 1966 she completed a post-Vatican II revision of *The Adaptive Way* and celebrated her golden jubilee. Sister Mary Rosalia Walsh served as the librarian of the motherhouse and became involved in social justice groups, including the League of Women Voters. She spent her last years in the infirmary and died on January 21, 1982.

Sister Rosalia and the Mission Helpers had “their greatest influence on the catechetical field from 1948 to 1960” (Spellacy 1984, 240). Today the Sisters are involved in other endeavors to help the poor, but no longer are involved in addressing or publishing catechetical materials. Sister Rosalia accomplished much in the field in spite of the many challenges she faced: “She influenced teachers, religious, clergy, parents and children for decades” (Spellacy 1984, 247). Sister Rosalia worked with a humble heart for the glory of God and in unity with her community to develop and hand on better catechetical methods. This chapter now turns to the theoretical and methodological foundations underlying the catechetical ministry of Rosalia Walsh and the Mission Helpers of the Sacred Heart.

### Theory and Method in the Adaptive Way

In 1905, Pius X’s *Acerbo Nimis (On Teaching Christian Doctrine)* called on the Catholic hierarchy to make alleviating widespread ignorance of the faith their common concern. Without religious instruction, the Pope wrote, it is impossible to “expect a fulfillment of
the duties of a Christian” (n. 5). Pius urged bishops and priests to see to the weekly instruction of boys and girls from the text of the catechism for an hour (n. 19) in addition to separate sessions for sacramental preparation (n. 20). Every parish was to establish a society of the Confraternity of Christian Doctrine (n. 22). Emphatically, Pius X added that no one, regardless of intelligence or oratory skills, would ever be able to teach Catholic doctrine to children who had not availed him or herself of extensive and careful study and preparation (n. 26). On Teaching Christian Doctrine is often referred to as the catalyst for the catechetical revival movements of the twentieth century. The Catholic Church in the United States responded with serious attention to the document, though it would be a gradual process before the undercurrents, stirring first in Europe, would reach this continent.

The Mission Helpers of the Sacred Heart had been involved in catechetical ministry for twenty-five years by the time Josephine Mary Walsh became a novice in 1916. Their past work had been in the areas of ministry to the “publickers” (Catholic children attending public schools), African-American mothers and their children, and the deaf. Besides their Sunday school efforts, the Sisters sewed and collected clothing for the poor, set up shelters for women, and established industrial schools. By the mid- to late-1890s, the Mission Helpers were recognized for their catechetical successes. They learned their teaching methods from their own experiences in dealing with the needs of those they encountered. As early as 1895, the Sisters were using Bible stories to enhance the catechism lesson and recognized the need to involve parents as much as possible in the religious instruction of children (Spellacy 1984, 48).

These were years of a growing impetus toward certification for Catholic school teachers and the preparation of catechists, both lay and religious. It was of no less a concern to the Mission Helpers. The way one learned to teach was to apprentice under a master teacher. Those outside of religious teaching communities needed to be trained by those who had experience, especially in the case of preparing catechists to teach in the special situation of the “publickers,” as the public school Catholic children were called. Catholic school historian Timothy Walch described the difficulty teachers had in finding schools for this kind of training: “To be sure, [Thomas] Shields had established his
model college and several Catholic universities had opened
departments of education, but these programs could provide training
for only a few hundred teachers each year” (Walch 1996, 145).

Sister Mary Rosalia’s natural affinity for working with children was
already well honed and the Sisters quickly recognized in her an
advocate and potential leader in their efforts to bring the faith to
Catholic children attending public schools. Through her efforts, the
Adaptive Way was organized so that it might be systematically shared
and taught among the Mission Helpers and later across the nation
(Spellacy 1984, 104). Sister Rosalia wrote:

Teaching the catechism . . . means more than teaching the
definitions contained in the catechism. It means teaching
religion in all the ways in which the child learns, and in which
the divine truths of revelation will become vital forces in his
life. We sum it up in one brief principle, called the principle
of adaptation: All teaching must be adapted to the nature and the
needs of the child. (Walsh 1944, ix)

The theory and the method of the Adaptive Way were adapted from the
experience of the Mission Helpers and other catechetical sources as well
as adapted to the nature of the child.

Sister Rosalia’s work with Catholic children attending public
schools and those who would be their catechists occurred during a time
of widespread dissatisfaction with catechetical practices both in Europe
and in the United States. Methods of teaching the faith remained
largely unchanged for four centuries, focused as they were on rote
memorization of catechetical formulae written in the dry, abstract
language of Scholastic philosophy. Catechetical journals and reviews in
the early decades of the twentieth century reflected a growing
discontent among scholars with the teaching methods being employed
and the inadequacy of the catechism as a textbook.

The most commonly used catechetical method at the end of the
nineteenth century was one of text explanation followed by
memorization. The explanation of the text was analytical and exegetical
and sought to help students understand the words and concepts of the
questions and answers they were to commit to memory. The following
instruction for catechists is descriptive of the aridity of this method:
In the explanation the catechist should keep exactly the wording of the catechism without adding other matter, for example, from other catechisms. The content of the prescribed catechism is in itself so rich that the catechist need not waste time searching for subject matter outside it. . . . [The catechist] should divide the answer into its component parts, first by singling out the subject and the predicate of the sentence and their modifiers and then by stressing the relative clauses pertaining both to the subject and the predicate. (W. Pichler 1907, quoted in Jungmann 1959, 177)

While the aim of the lessons was still the memorization of the catechism, this method added a deductive explanation of the abstract doctrinal formulae of the catechism. Although it expressed the admirable concern of helping the children understand what they were memorizing, this method was clearly not in tune with what Sister Rosalia and the Mission Helpers were discovering about how children best learn.

At the turn of the century in Europe, The Society of Catechists in Munich and Vienna looked to secular education and educational psychology for ways to revitalize catechetical method and provide students with deeper and more meaningful applications of faith to life. Catholic historian of religious education, Raymond A. Lucker, views this shift in catechetical aim as one moving from catechesis as information to catechesis as formation (1966). The method developed by these European catechetical societies, known as the Munich (or Psychological or Stieglitz) method “was popularized in the United States by students who studied under the successors of the originators of the plan” (Collins 1966, 20).

As early as 1908, Mother Demetrias of the Mission Helpers was in conversation with Thomas Shields of Catholic University about his methods of teaching religion (Spellacy 1984, 101). Later the Sisters were introduced to the work of the German Jesuits, Michael Gatterer, and Felix Krus, who together in 1914 wrote *Theory and Practice of the Catechism*. The text addressed the key question: “Shall we keep the catechism as it is, or shall we teach it by means of Bible History?” (Gatterer and Krus 1914, 103). Within their text, Gatterer and Krus identified twenty-seven principles of catechetical instruction. These
twenty-seven principles form the heart of the Adaptive Way. The authors sought to harmonize the use of the catechism for instruction with modern pedagogical methods and the teaching methods of Jesus and the early Church:

Under the guise of returning the method of Christ, to teach religion chiefly in parables and according to psychological methods (the two are held to be one and the same thing), there is a tendency, the authors notice to do away with the catechism as no longer up to the requirements of present-day pedagogy. . . . While strong advocates of all sane modern theories in pedagogy by which catechetical teaching may benefit, the authors of the present work, however, with insight and discrimination, hold the balance evenly, and show from history, reason, and experience that the teaching methods of the Church, sanctioned by twenty centuries of practical results, are not to be lightly discarded; that the teachers however, need to be frequently aroused to a full and clear realization of their duty to be self-sacrificing “Apostles of Jesus Christ.” (Gatterer and Krus 1914, 6)

Sister Rosalia’s writing reflected the principles of Gatterer and Krus as well. These Jesuit priests accepted the processes that came to known as the Munich method. Their principles analyze and logically address the new method point by point and offer the authors’ reasoning and proof for the acceptance of each principle into the catechetical practices of the Church. Following and incorporating these ideas, Sister Rosalia’s writings proposed in theory that catechesis is primarily for the building of a living faith that becomes evident in the actions of the learner. While the catechism remained the central core of the content, Bible history as well as liturgy, Church history, hymns, and the lives of the saints should augment the doctrinal lessons. The enhanced catechetical endeavor made its way through the whole catechism at least every two years, with a review every year. The teachings of the catechism should be clear and easily understood by the listener. While memorization was important, application and practice of the doctrines was essential. The training of the heart was more important than the instruction. The virtues were to be taught to the children and their practice encouraged.
Children should be trained in the virtues of work, prayer, obedience, truthfulness, and chastity. It was of extreme importance that the catechist maintained discipline, order, respect, and reverence in the classroom of religion in order to gain the hearts of the children. Finally, each lesson was to be a “methodological unit and made to appeal to the children from the outset” (Gatterer and Krus 1924, 395-404).

The Mission Helpers’ Adaptive Way, in theory and in practice, was in actuality an adaptation of several methods. The “adaptation” in the Adaptive Way referred to the Mission Helpers’ understanding that “all teaching must be adapted to the nature and needs of the child, to the subject matter, and to the circumstances under which it is taught” (Walsh 1955, 57). As noted earlier, Sister Rosalia and the Mission Helpers also “adapted” the principles of the twenty-seven catechetical principles of Gatterer and Krus addressed above and combined them with other catechetical methods of the time (the Sulpician Method and the more progressive Shields Method) to formulate the aptly named Adaptive Way method (Spellacy 1984, 130-31).

Factors in Successful Planning and Teaching

The factors of successful teaching in a religion class were “first and most important” order and discipline (Walsh 1944, 1). Second, what Sister Rosalia called “vivid teaching” would serve to “happily engage” children in their learning and curtail any disruptive behaviors that may result from boredom. Reverence and courtesy is considered basic to all good teaching. Finally, the use of rewards should be to “stimulate further effort” and should be used only “sparingly and with caution” (1).

Sister Rosalia wrote extensively on the process of lesson design in the Adaptive Way. Every teaching manual included a section on developing the lesson plan for the public school children in Confraternity classes. While the catechism supplied the content, and was gradually memorized over the years, the method of the Adaptive Way stressed that children first be helped to understand the material, since “learning presupposed far more than memory work” (Walsh 1944, 40).

The process should begin with the identification of both teacher and student aims. For Sister Rosalia, these aims must be clear in the
catechist’s mind to insure the focus and clarity of all the elements of the lesson. Doctrinal content for each lesson is provided in the graded course text that every catechist using the method would have. Also in the early stages of planning, the catechist should locate visual aids and materials for the class and prepare a list of the words the children will need to know in order to understand the doctrine being taught. These vocabulary words might be put on flashcards or written on a blackboard. The catechist might use charts, pictures, story, or discussion to familiarize the children with the vocabulary for the lesson.

The five steps of the lesson plan as explained by Sister Rosalia in *Teaching Religion the Adaptive Way* (1966) are: 1) Orientation, 2) Presentation, 3) Assimilation, 4) Organization, and 5) Recitation (Walsh 1943, 677ff). A description of what is entailed in each step follows, with special attention to the use of story in the Presentation phase, which was an important hallmark of the Adaptive Way.

**Orientation**

The first step of the lesson did not involve teaching. The orientation was devised in order to help the child recall knowledge that he or she already had on the topic for the day. The educational principle involved in this stage is apperception, “the act or process of adding a new idea or series of ideas to an old one” (Walsh 1937, 22). The linking of the new idea to one already known by the child helped the new information to be retained and assimilated. In this stage the teacher established the necessary connection between the religious concept to be learned and the child’s experience. This could be done by tapping into the knowledge a child might already possess on the doctrine to be taught. A closely-related doctrine could be called to the mind of the child or an ordinary experience that the child might have had could be brought out to help the child understand what is to come later in the lesson (Walsh 1957, xvi).

Techniques that enhanced the orientation process included pre-testing, discussion, and use of images, words, or symbols that may stimulate recall and recognition for association of past experiences or previously learned related doctrines with the new idea. Walsh believed this stage to be of critical importance in motivating the
student for learning and for the teacher to be able to grasp the full attention of the child. This part of the lesson ended with an evocative question that would stimulate the student’s interest in the lesson for the day (Walsh 1966, 321-22).

**Presentation**

The presentation constituted the most important part of the lesson. All elements of good pedagogy applied to the teaching of the main idea, doctrine, scripture passage, and so on. The presentation may also occur within the context of liturgy or Christian witness. The purpose of the presentation was “to teach some aspect of the Mystery of Christ in ways that will engage the whole child in the desired response” (Walsh 1966, 323). Moreover, the presentation should teach the children how to live in light of the lesson learned and “motivate them to live that way; that is, to give them supernatural reasons or motives for living in that manner” (Walsh 1957, xviii).

The four sources of catechesis–Scripture, Liturgy, Doctrine, and Witness–provided the content for the topical focus of the presentation. The catechist considered what was essential and appropriate for student learning in the doctrinal subject matter. The “means” of transmitting the content might vary from catechist to catechist. Many teaching manuals supplied the appropriate subject, methods, and teaching aids for each lesson. Sister Walsh promoted the use of a variety of techniques to stimulate student interest in the presentation including the use of “story, filmstrip, discussion, song, drama, pictures and others” (Walsh 1966, 323). The doctrine and practice at hand should be woven into the story or presentation and there should be time allowed for questions and discussion, especially with older children (Walsh 1957, xix).

In this part of the lesson, Walsh stressed participation especially to stimulate students who are likely to be tired in religion class after a full day in public school. She also maintained the importance of the use of story and visual image in capturing the children’s religious imaginations. Several key themes may be culled from Rosalia’s writing on the use of story. She devoted entire chapters in texts and manuals to encourage catechists to the use of story and story telling. Grounded in Jesus’ use of story for teaching, the principles of apperception from
educational psychology, and many years of personal experience in teaching children, Walsh was convinced that stories were the key to opening up the religious sensibilities of the child and led to a deeper understanding of doctrine that in turn facilitated transformation of the will and actions. She wrote, “The story arouses interest and holds attention. It fires the imagination, stirs the emotions, aids the understanding, and influences the will” (Walsh 1959, 69).

The story was one of the most important aspects of the presentation part of the Adaptive Way lesson plan: “The story should arouse wonder, awe, it should deepen faith and love” (Walsh 1966, 240). Scripture stories hold the place of prominence for Walsh because salvation history is the story of God acting in love for the salvation of humankind and thus is the basis of all doctrine. The purpose of telling a story is, for Walsh, the teaching of doctrine and the motivating of the child to live it (Walsh 1959, 81): “Through a well-told story the abstract definitions of the catechism become concrete, living realities to the child and he learns with ease and joy” (Walsh 1959, 81). However, it must be noted that the story was always a means to an end. At the conclusion of the lesson it was the catechism question that should be remembered, understood and recited by the children: “The abstract definitions of the catechism must become living realities in the mind of the child, and in his life. Stories help to effect this; that is why we tell them” (Walsh 1944, 150).

The catechist should exercise care in choice and preparation of the story. The choice of story should highlight the doctrine to be taught and never overshadow it. Nor should it be so dramatic that the child recalls only the story and not the teaching. One story should suffice and should not be overcrowded with unnecessary detail or diversions. Stories should be selected from the Bible, from Church history, from the lives of saints, and from practical, everyday Catholic life. The chief source of stories for all ages . . . is the life of Christ. Selection is made on the basis of the doctrine to be taught and the grade to which it is to be taught. . . . Doctrine, presented in action in the life of a child saint, is easily understood by the children and appeals strongly to them. Stories of saints should be told so that they are Christ-centered. (Walsh 1944, 150)
Some stories in the Old Testament were deemed unsuitable material for young children. The story should be age-appropriate and its language and content adapted to the age of the child. The language used in a story shapes the picture it creates in the child’s imagination. The characters should stand out and the message should not be obscure. Sister Rosalia believed that pictures used to illustrate a “revealed truth should be 1) theologically correct; 2) historically correct; 3) beautiful; 4) reverent; and 5) adapted to the student” (Walsh 1966, 250).

Other sources of stories suitable for use in the presentation were nature and human experience “in which case the story should embody only such events as have or may actually happen” (Bandas 1935, 27). However, fairy tales and imaginative narratives were to be avoided, as they were not seen as enlightened by the grace of God. Even stories of the lives of the saints, whose catechetical value was addressed by the early Church, must be used with great caution so not as to hold up lives of exaggerated virtue and superhuman feats that the children might not themselves achieve or take to so emotionally that stories of everyday life may come to be seen as drab. The catechist was called to use great care in the selection of Scripture passages.

In the method of the Adaptive Way, only the well-planned and rehearsed story would be successful. Attention should be paid to its structure, organization, and suitability for the age group. Sister Rosalia perceived the overall purpose of teaching religion as bringing children into relationship with the Divine through a gradual process of introducing the doctrines of God in a way that helps them to lead their lives in a new way. No amount of creative lesson planning can surpass the power of a well-told story.

As well as encouraging use of story in the presentation of the religion class, sound proof or apologetic defense of doctrinal materials may be included with older children. Walsh had the sensitivity and experience to acknowledge that many questions about a particular doctrinal teaching are attempts to understand the teaching more fully, not necessarily to challenge it. A confident catechist will not be ruffled by the children’s questions.

One of the most important parts of the presentation was its application. The teacher assisted the child in drawing out implications of the presentation for life when this did not occur naturally. The
application of the lesson may come spontaneously from the children without any prompting; it may be drawn out by the catechist with questions or it may be simply and directly taught. Whatever method employed, the catechist was to strive to help the students see the value of the teaching for Christian living. Walsh wrote:

The effectiveness of our presentation of Religion to the child depends on the degree to which, with the grace of God, we succeed in making Religion the paramount value in his (her) life, that which he (she) appreciates and loves beyond all other desirable things, and therefore lives. (1943, 779)

The value of the presentation for the pupil was its ability to stimulate growth in knowledge, to aid in appreciating revealed doctrine, and to motivate for Christian witness (Walsh 1966, 323).

Assimilation Exercises

The third step involved activities that helped the pupil to more deeply comprehend the meanings of the presentation. This stage also provided some information for the catechist concerning how effective his or her teaching was in effecting student learning and comprehension. Further questioning, working with the text, or having students fill out worksheets aided the assimilation process. Such activities were oral or written and provided opportunities for exercises “in which the child judges, chooses, arranges, answers questions, gives reasons and motives, matches, identifies, associates, completes—in other words, thinks about and works over the content of the presentation” (Walsh 1943, 780). This step of the lesson also helped the catechist to see where he or she might need to do some re-teaching or further explanation of the doctrine.

Many catechisms of the day, including the *Baltimore Catechism* (revised edition) contained exercises for student assimilation at the end of each lesson. This stage assisted students in becoming familiar with the structure and vocabulary of the text they had committed to memory. Assimilation exercises were done in class or were extended into some form of home study assignment.
Organization

The fourth step in the lesson may be understood best as re-organization of the material after it had been broken down, back into the original whole of the presentation: “The purpose of the Organization is to train the children in developing well-connected thought and speech concerning their religion” (Walsh 1957, xxi). Ideas from the presentation were placed in order by the class as a whole or by individual students on their own. When time was limited, as it often was for public school children in a parish religion class, this step may have been omitted. It was not generally recommended for younger elementary school children.

The value of organization is that it allowed for student expression of independent thought and fostered logical, ordered thinking. The means of achieving this included written or oral summaries by the students, arrangement of flashcards or key sentences, and analysis of the scripture or liturgical ritual (Walsh 1966, 324-25).

Recitation

The fifth and final step of the lesson actually occurred at the start of the next religion class. It was the time when “the class gives back to the catechist the material she (he) presented, and answers the catechism questions in which the doctrine is summarized” (Walsh 1943, 784): “The purpose of the Recitation is to find out whether the children understand and remember what they have been taught, and whether they have studied at home the material that was assigned” (Walsh 1957, xxi). The catechist could check the accuracy of the children’s learning and evaluate the home study process. When the recitation was faulty, the catechist would provide remedial help. Where recitation was satisfactory, the catechist gave approval and recognized the achievements of the pupils. Sister Rosalia taught catechists that

In Religion class it is extremely important that the pupil should want to answer well. When a spirit of achievement and success is built up in class, it helps to solve the problems of interest and attention, and the greater problem of study at home. One way to build it is to encourage. (Walsh 1943, 785)
Sister Rosalia ends her text, *Child Psychology and Religion*, by noting that when the children could tell in their own words what they should do as a consequence of the lesson learned, the teaching had most likely been clear. “Sometimes, though,” she admitted, “they need a little help” (Walsh 1937, 133).

From her earliest experiences of catechizing immigrant children alongside her father to the time of her illness and death, Sister Rosalia was tireless in her efforts to promote catechetical advancement. Several major contributions made by Sister Rosalia Walsh to Christian education follow. She entered the field at the time the catechetical renewal movement was occurring in the U.S., and therefore is a rich study for students of American Catholic catechetical history. Because she incorporated principles of progressive education and insights from educational and developmental psychology, many of her methods of teaching and planning still have currency.

**The Family as the Primary Center of Religious Education**

Her own family upbringing deeply instilled the notion of religious education by the family into the core of Sister Rosalia’s pedagogy. The ideal Catholic home exuded a catechetical atmosphere, where a “practical Catholic mother and father” had “received the Sacrament of Matrimony with all the graces this gives for living together in peace and union” (Walsh 1937, 29). This sacrament instills the duty of instructing the children in the faith and morals, which should begin very early on in the life of the child. Conversation, prayer, and patient addressing of the child’s questions help the parent form the child’s faith. For Walsh, religion must be correlated with Christian living and therefore the child’s primary environment for socialization is the home. When this ideal home life is coupled with the attendance of the child at a parochial school, “the child has a splendid beginning for a life of practical Catholicity” (Walsh 1937, 35).

Not all families offered this ideal catechizing environment. Sister Rosalia believed in home visitations to assist catechists in understanding the situation of the children whom they taught and allowed for the education of parents in matters such as their responsibility to bring their children to Mass and to catechetical classes
regularly. The teaching of the catechist, according to Sister Walsh, was secondary to that of the parents and the parish priest. She noted:

Our teaching is classified differently. We are to supplement what the parents give in the home. It is we who should co-operate with the home, even while we seek actively to win the home to co-operate with us, and where right order reigns, where parents are fulfilling their God-given duty of teaching their children to know, love and serve God, this is done. (1952, 174)

The goal of such “fishing” (home visitors were called “Fishers”) was to create mutuality between the parents and the religion teacher so that the children would register yearly and attend regularly. Appreciating the work of each other went a long way to foster the spirit of cooperation between parent and catechist. Sister Rosalia proposed the formation of Confraternity Parent-Teacher Associations, similar to the PTAs of public schools. These associations not only benefited the religion center by supplying parent support for classes, field trips, and libraries, but also afforded the parents opportunities to learn how to better teach their children religion and assist with their lessons in the home. In some cases, as Sister Rosalia well understood, the “work of giving effective instruction to the children includes what we may call the spiritual rehabilitation of the home” (Walsh 1946b, 508).

Catholic Pupils of Public Schools

Sister Rosalia clearly understood the missionary quality of religious education with those Catholic children who, for a myriad of reasons, were outside the parish and/or the parish school community. She was sensitive to the causes, among which were: 1) there was no parish school at all or it was overcrowded; 2) the parents’ marriage was mixed, and the Catholic parent conceded the idea of Catholic school for the children; 3) indifference to religion; 4) lack of transportation to the parochial school; and 5) poverty.

Sympathetic to their needs and experiences from her childhood visitations with her father to the children of immigrants, Sister Rosalia
decided early on that her vocation was to teach these children who, in the eyes of many, were so deprived. She described them as children who are children of the Church, members of the parish, called to be saints even as their more favored brothers and sisters of the parochial school, but faced with more obstacles in striving for that blessed consummation. . . . Each has a right to know the truths of religion that form a complete whole and make it possible to live as a child of God and member of the Church. (Walsh 1951a, 475)

If the catechists are to adapt the lessons to the situation of the learners, they must be familiar with the home environment, but not only that. Catechists must also have a great sensitivity to the unique needs of the public school student and great love for what they are doing. The students should be placed in a graded class, the same as the grade in public school, regardless of the amount of previous instruction or number of sacraments received.

Additionally, religion classes for the public school student should not be a synthesis of the parish school classes. Careful consideration of the environment, the length of days and class time, late comers, and sporadic attendance are all special considerations for students who are coming to religious education after long hours in the public school classroom. Often, the CCD classes were not given the quality and quantity of supplies that the parish school classes received. Sister Walsh, while never failing to uphold the unique value of the Catholic school, took exception to such practices:

> Effective religious education of the Catholic child of public school is a missionary work that helps to preserve, to build, or to revivify Catholic family life and parish life; it is a task that challenges the best that is in us, and should be given only the best. (Walsh 1946b, 153)

**Sister Rosalia and the Munich Method in the U.S.**

Sister Rosalia was only one of several proponents of the Munich Method in the United States: “Such writers as J. J. Baierl, Rudolph G. Bandas, Joseph B. Collins, S.S., Aloysius J. Heeg, S.J., Anthony N.
Fuerst, and Sister M. Rosalia, M.H.S.H. were among the leaders to make the Munich Method intelligible to American readers’ (Lucker and Stone, in Hofinger and Stone 1964, 243). The radical shift in catechetical method in the United States during the early years of the twentieth century from memorization and text analysis of the catechism to the Munich Method was grounded in the principles of the educational psychology of Johann Herbart (1778-1841).

The Adaptive Way was based largely, but not solely, on the Munich Method. Sister Rosalia systematized her method for the catechetical instruction of Catholic children not attending parochial schools and wrote manuals so that catechists might be trained to use it (Nolan 2006, 1-2). The lesson plans and teachers’ manuals prepared by Sister Rosalia and the Mission Helpers largely reflected the strong influence of the Munich Method. Based on the educational psychology of Johann Herbart, the steps for lesson preparation (presentation, explanation, and application) parallel the steps of learning (perception, understanding, and assimilation). The Munich Method did not intend to radically alter the content of the catechetical lesson. Yet the new psychological method opened the door for a more suitable way of addressing Church doctrine with children and by giving the Bible a place of primacy, actually began to reshape the landscape of catechetical content.

The hallmark of Sister Rosalia’s catechetical manuals and lesson plans was their organization around a central theme. The graded courses were concentric in content, meaning that all major doctrines were addressed each year with increasing development according to the level of understanding of the learners (Walsh 1956b, 92). As the students progressed, the doctrine was treated in more detail and Scripture and history were added for the older students. The lessons were based on the principle of apperception (proceeding from the known to the unknown) and on the concept that all knowledge comes to the learner through the senses.

In later years the Munich Method would be criticized for its lack of student participation and its teacher centeredness. It began with a Bible story rather than the actual experience of the child. It failed to note the limitations of the catechism in passing on the entirety and fullness of the kerygma, the Good News proclaimed. However, over the years the revision of Sister Rosalia’s texts on the Adaptive Way showed
a developmental increase in her reliance on Scripture. Ultimately, the method consistently relied most heavily on the teaching experiences of the Mission Helpers.

The Importance of Proper Teacher Preparation

For Sister Rosalia, the first step in preparing children for what she called “complete Catholicity” was to prepare oneself to teach religion. To this end she dedicated her life’s work. Her professional life was lived out in the era of the development of standardization and certification requirements for teachers of religion. Early in her career, Sister Rosalia saw the wisdom and necessity of training lay catechists. She began the work of training catechists in the novitiate and never abandoned it. Her personal sense of vocation and love of God seemed to energize her work. Hers was a natural gift, a special calling that preceded any special training which she always responsibly sought for herself. She wondered if the Church could afford to neglect any opportunities to train the catechist who is

a brave person indeed—or should we say presumptuous?—who is willing to engage in a work in which right orientation of life in this world and the issue of eternity are always influenced and often decided. (Walsh 1951a, 476)

Regular class attendance, a high level of student learning, and drawing out appropriate responses from the children all depended on a well-trained catechist. For Sister Rosalia, there was no more important work. In an inspiring talk she said:

It is excellent to be a catechist; one may hope in the course of the years to teach religion to hundreds of children. What of training as a leader who will in turn train catechists? One such leader may train fifty or a hundred catechists within a year. These will teach thousands of children. Hundreds of thousands wait. (1951a, 476)

Each manual written by Sister Rosalia expressed the care she would have her catechists put into preparing to teach. Though the manuals
contained complete lesson plans, they also expressed the need for catechists to do background reading and to write out their own plans each week. As she insisted, “Careful preparation enables them to teach with strength, simplicity and clear cut accuracy” (Walsh 1951b, 119).

In 1956, Sister Rosalia recommended to the National Catechetical Congress that two thirty-hour courses, one in content (The Revised Baltimore Catechism No. 3) and the other in method, be offered as a standard course of study for advanced preparation of lay catechists: “‘You ask a great deal of the catechists,’ a priest said to me, and the answer was, ‘We would rather have a few well trained, than a larger number inadequately prepared’” (Walsh 1956a, 114).

**Conclusion**

Sister M. Rosalia Walsh was a pioneer and a leader in the field of catechetics in her day. Yet she was also a humble soul, dedicated to her calling and to her community. She exercised humility and obedience to her community and vows throughout her long life. She asked nothing of others that she would not ask of herself. There was no group too small for her to go to in order to share her experiences of teaching and learning. She sought no personal credit for the initiatives she embarked on in behalf of her community. She lost no opportunity to make explicit the role of her community in the development of the Adaptive Way. Her image as model catechist was always kept within the context of the communal work of the Mission Helpers of the Sacred Heart.

In addition to her practical contributions, this chapter has traced the importance of Sister Rosalia’s educational theory and, in particular, its relevance for catechesis with children educated outside the Catholic school system. Her strong convictions about the practices of catechesis were based in sound educational theory and child psychology. Early on, she recognized that a difference in context meant a difference in materials, methods, and overall approach. Moreover, in working with children, she emphasized the social and religious role of the parents and family in the shaping of the children’s religious sensibilities and their understanding of faith as a way of life. She realized also the importance of a mature educator who recognizes the need for ongoing growth in faith for all members of the church.

Sister Rosalia wrote an article for the journal *Lumen Vitae* (1947) in which she highlighted the power of religious education to bring
about the transformation of society and the world. She recognized in
the years just after World War II that the future really lay in the hands
of the children that were being taught in the churches. This is a rare
article, not addressing practical concerns, but theological truths that
must emerge through the study of all the disciplines and subject areas
of Catholic education if a bond of world unity is to be achieved. She
wrote: “True knowledge is a living growth . . . and this growth must be
fostered and guided” (268). This is accomplished by teachers who

stress the great germinal truths, those truths of which knowledge
and love and love and practice should grow and expand in the
child with each year of life. God as our loving Father is the first
and all men as our brothers is the second. (269)

Militating against this growth are totalitarianism and racial
discrimination. The first envisions humans “in terms of a servant or
slave” and the second “evaluates on the basis of the color of skin” (270).
Both demean the dignity of the human person. To overcome these
biases, Rosalia thought that adding more content to the religion course
would be a mistake. Rather, “effective teaching of religion requires even
more than thought and assimilation: it requires presentation of
religious truth in ways that will give clear understanding, deepen
convictions, develop appreciation, teach right values” (274). It falls to
religious education to produce apostles—those “who radiate the peace of
Christ and the strength that goes with it. World unity cannot come
otherwise” (277).

Sister Mary Rosalia Walsh of the Mission Helpers of the Sacred
Heart is remembered for her many contributions to the Confraternity
of Christian Doctrine in both the training of catechists and the writing
of catechetical materials that ultimately fostered the missionary spirit
and compassionate dedication for so many Catholic children who did
not attend Catholic schools. The challenges she faced remain the
challenges of the Church today.

In our time, the numbers of Catholic children who do not have
the opportunity to learn about their faith in Catholic schools or
Catholic religious education programs is staggering. The Church
continues to deal with a shortage of well-prepared catechists. In the
words of Sister Rosalia:
Teaching the small earthly sons and daughters of our Heavenly Father is a very beautiful work, but like everything worth while, has its own difficulties. . . . We do not work alone. For all teachers there is the true source of confidence: “I am come to cast fire on the earth: and what will I but that it be kindled” (Luke 7, 49). (Walsh 1937, 135)