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## **Training catechists: Making catechesis visible and vital in our diocese**

Lydia Reynolds

“Roseanne, you simply must come back to receive the degree you have earned — the graduation ceremony is such a witness to the dedication of individuals to on-going education in the Catholic faith. It is the only time when the world can see the fruit of the hard work and sacrifices that you all have made,” said Dr. Caroline Farey, urging her student to take the time and money to return to Birmingham, England, and go through the ceremony officially marking the recognition of arduous studies completed.

Dr. Farey’s plea really does demonstrate a strange reality when it comes to catechist training — it is so often invisible, especially when, as in the case of Maryvale Ecclesiastical Institute, the students are from all over the world, yet studying at home.

### **Distance learning at Maryvale**

Roseanne Sharpe did attend her graduation, being one of the first to receive from Maryvale an ecclesiastical degree: a bachelor’s degree in divinity validated by the École Cathédrale in Paris, on behalf of the Congregation for Education in Rome. She also received a bachelor’s degree in applied theology validated by Open University. Bishop Mark Davies of Shrewsbury awarded the degrees in a graduation ceremony on Nov. 23 at St. Chad’s Cathedral in Birmingham with 60 other graduates receiving certificates, bachelor’s or master’s degrees, or doctorates. Students came from a large number of countries in Europe, North America, Africa and other places of the British Commonwealth.

In addition to her degrees, Sharpe had what she described as a “complete surprise” awaiting her when, at the end of the ceremonies, she received the Kevin Preston Prize, given each year for “outstanding contribution to catechesis.”

Maryvale Ecclesiastical Institute is an international center for distance learning in catechesis, theology, philosophy and religious education, now approved by Rome as a Higher Institute of Religious Sciences. Distance learning at Maryvale means that students do their course work on a part-time basis at home, but meet one or more weekends a year in Maryvale together with their teachers and the other participants in the same course. These weekend meetings, when students and their teachers in a specific course meet face-to-face, are an important ingredient in the total program.

The on-campus weekend provides a faith-filled dimension right in the historic setting where Blessed John Henry Newman first lived as a Catholic convert. This year, four other students graduated with Sharpe in the bachelor of divinity program in the same degree “pathway”: a pathway that is designed to form catechists and other faith formation leaders.

### **What it has given her**

To earn her degree, Sharpe followed a rigorous program over a five-year period. The student is promised in the course description to gain “comprehensive and thorough doctrinal and theological formation,” (“and it really does give that,” Sharpe said), and he or she also

undergoes supervised practicums — training in handing on the faith in real life situations such as instructing in a faith formation class.

The course, divided into modules of increasing depth of study, allows students to aim at different levels of competence (some earn a certificate at two years, others continue toward a diploma 18 months later, and degree aspirants work toward a bachelor's degree involving five years of study). Sharpe has been enthusiastic about what her studies have done for her.

"This course has given me a systematic grounding in the truths of the faith in a way that is intellectually stimulating, spiritually enriching and practically applicable. The course books guided me to the sources (church documents, for example) in such a way as to allow me to gain the essential points and see 'the relation of truth to truth' — as Blessed John Henry Newman put it. I especially appreciated the modules on philosophy, finding them a valuable aid to understanding the relationship of faith and reason. All together the studies have been a challenging but wonderfully formative experience."

### **Research in text and image**

In her final year, Sharpe undertook a research project that ultimately caused her to spend her last three months living near Maryvale, mentored by her professor, Dr. Caroline Farey. Artistic experience and interest led Sharpe to study criteria "for effective juxtaposition of text and image" in presenting the truths of the Catholic faith. Using selected illuminated capital letters from medieval manuscripts, she identified ways in which the text informs the image and the image enriches the text with information and meanings that contribute to the learner's understanding.

Sharpe explained that the insights from her study are helpful, especially for "informing catechetical resources." And in fact, this is what Sharpe hopes to be doing, having returned home. She is well prepared to contribute to the publishing work, which includes catechetical resources, of Bethlehem Books. One might think that a distance-learning program with regular travel overseas would be costly. In fact, compared with normal college programs in America, even when the annual overseas travel is added in, the costs for Maryvale are a bargain at about \$3,340.

### **Good news**

Further good news is that Maryvale in Birmingham is now working in partnership with our Fargo Diocese to establish a local Catechetical Center — as described in the full article by Carol Harnett, its course director, in last month's *New Earth*. The Center will be training adults for a two-year Maryvale Certificate in Catechesis validated by Maryvale under the same distance-learning techniques used in England.

The content covers the same essential material of the first two years of the bachelor's degree course on a basic level and with less study time commitment. The annual weekends (four Saturdays a year, and a fundamental part of the student's commitment) will take place at a Grand Forks or Fargo site. Contact Katie Dubas at (701) 356-7908 for more information about this new opportunity. Deadline to register is Dec. 30. Maryvale's website is [www.maryvale.ac.uk](http://www.maryvale.ac.uk).

*Lydia Reynolds is a member of Bethlehem Community and directs its Virgil Michel Center, an outreach arm of the Community for spiritual-educational activities. To learn more about Bethlehem Books, visit [www.bethlehembooks.com](http://www.bethlehembooks.com).*