

THE
**Mystery We
Proclaim,**
SECOND EDITION
Catechesis for the Third Millennium

17. GCD, no. 73.
18. CT, no. 55.
19. Decree on Bishops, no. 14.
20. Thomas P. Walters, "Where are We Going? A Case for Learning Objectives in Religious Education," *PACE*, no. 18, p. 21 (Huntington, Ind.: Our Sunday Visitor, Inc., 1987-88).

Chapter 3

An Ecclesial Approach to Catechetical Methodology

Given the context and principles offered in the first two chapters of this part of the book, I would like to offer some practical suggestions for methodology that might be useful for religious educators. I have already noted that there is no one absolute methodology that must be followed and that, whatever approach is taken, will have to make ample adaptation for social, cultural, and developmental factors, utilizing both inductive and deductive approaches.

Nonetheless, the ecclesial approach to catechesis outlined in this entire book represents something of a shift of emphasis from what has been more common in American catechesis, and so I believe it will be helpful to suggest briefly some possible practical strategies that might be considered by those responsible for creating catechetical textual materials and pro-

grams. I believe that these suggestions are especially relevant in the light of the need to integrate the orientations of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* into our programs and materials.

Catechesis in an ecclesial context envisions believers who have already been in some way evangelized and who have made an initial response of faith to the God who has approached them in Jesus Christ. Catechesis seeks in some organized fashion to give growth to this seed of faith, to nourish it, and to develop a deeper understanding of the mystery of Christ and its meaning for the lives of those who are served.¹

In order for this to happen, I suggest that catechetical methodology might include five steps. These are:

1. Preparation
2. Proclamation
3. Explanation
4. Application
5. Celebration

I shall offer a few thoughts on each step and hope that the creativity of publishers and teachers will give them further development.

First Step: Preparation

This step suggests that the catechist must help create the conditions for the possibility of a deepening of God's Word in the hearts of those being served. This is no easy task in the setting of modern, hectic life in the Western world, where the individual is daily subjected to a barrage of stimuli from the media of communication, advertising, competing ideologies, etc.

Rather than begin catechesis with a focus on one's present experience, which is so inundated with influences that are anything but transcendent, I suggest that the first step needs to be

some kind of temporary "calculated disengagement" that helps the believer to become open, docile, and receptive to the absolute truth of God's Word. At a later stage, when the roots of faith have been deepened, the believer will and must turn to reengagement and critical reflection. To focus at the start on the contemporary environment, so riddled with ambiguity and sinfulness, does not seem to me to be the most promising approach for religious education.

Paul the Apostle, it seems, made a brief flirtation with the critical-engagement model of catechesis (see Acts 17:22-33) in Athens but quickly learned that it brought few dividends. Moving to Corinth, he returned to faith in the absolute power of his transcendent message and significantly wrote to the Corinthians: "The natural man does not accept what is taught by the Spirit of God. For him, that is absurdity. He cannot come to know such teaching because it must be appraised in a spiritual way" (1 Cor 2:14).

Accordingly, it seems to me that the first step in catechesis is to devise strategies and approaches that will help participants to be open to the unique wisdom of faith that comes only from the Holy Spirit.

In a practical way, this will mean introducing techniques to foster exterior and interior silence and render participants receptive to the Word of God. Perhaps the goal of this step is reflected in the Gospel image of Mary of Bethany, who "sat beside the Lord at his feet listening to him speak" (Lk 10:39). In this context, I believe we should not see the school classroom physical setting as the desirable one for catechesis. While catechesis has a crucial instructional component, it seeks a total cognitive, affective, and behavioral response. It is desirable, then, that the setting for catechetical sessions have something of the aura of "holy space." A carpeted room, with a cross and Bible properly displayed and with seats arranged in a more communitarian position, would be the preferable arrangement. Such a setting suggests to participants that something important, special, and different will take place here.

Recent decades have seen a rediscovery of the Church's ancient tradition of contemplative and centering prayer. This positive development should be exploited by religious educators to help those they serve to find that "inner room" where they may really commune with the Father and hear His Word. Experience has taught us that even young children will respond positively to a call to contemplative prayer. In this step, inventive catechists will find ways to use appropriate music and other mood-setting devices to help create an atmosphere in which participants can "be still and know that I am God" (RSV Ps 46:10 [11]).

A second aspect of the preparation phase is perhaps even more challenging. The whole post-Enlightenment culture and world-view have so focused Western people on their subjectivity — and consequently on their feelings, desires and will — that the first step of authentic catechesis must be to help people overcome and step out of this self-absorbed environment and into the bright sunlight of the living and loving God.

This first step, therefore, I believe, must be to call believers to acknowledge in depth that "none of us lives as his own master and none of us dies as his own master. For if we live, we live for the Lord, and if we die, we die for the Lord; so then, whether we live or die, we are the Lord's" (Rom 14:7-8).

Overcoming the dominant subjectivity of our culture is a first step and a great challenge for catechesis. It must be done gently, not brusquely, realizing that people are on a complex faith journey in a generally hostile world. Creative catechists need to explore ways of moving in a program from hospitality and true welcome of participants to a true orientation of openness and eagerness for God's Word. As in all the steps suggested here, this "step" may be the work of several sessions, but I believe it is an indispensable prelude to what follows.

Whatever strategies are adopted in this first step must always respect the dignity and freedom of participants and avoid manipulation by the teacher or catechist. Nonetheless, the first step of authentic catechesis needs to be this preparation in

which the catechized are called before the living and loving God to hear His Word with an attitude of humble and generous receptivity.

Second Step: Proclamation

The new *Catechism of the Catholic Church* insists in the Prologue that catechesis involves in a central way "transmission" of the content of the faith. Accordingly, it seems to me that, presuming the preparation noted in the first step, the second step of catechesis is the proclamation, the announcing of God's Word. It is this aspect that from the start gave us the word catechesis — coming from the Greek word meaning to reecho, to resound the Word of God.

Primacy in catechetical methodology, therefore, must be given to the faithful and effective announcement of this Word as it is expressed in the Scriptures and in the Church's living Tradition enunciated by its Magisterium and "authentic Teachers" the Pope and bishops — who have the spiritual guidance of the Holy Spirit for their exercise of this task.²

This proclamation may interweave deductive and inductive approaches, but the catechist needs to be clear that ultimately the truths being taught are from God, are based on Revelation, and can only make sense with the inner teaching of the Holy Spirit.

"Indeed, the word of God is living and effective, sharper than any two-edged sword, penetrating even between soul and spirit, joints and marrow, and able to discern reflections and thoughts of the heart" (Heb 4:12). The second step of catechesis, which is really the central one, must allow this Word to fulfill its task as described in Hebrews.

The catechist will always be aware that this Word he or she proclaims is simultaneously a "Good News" of God's saving love and a judgment on the sinfulness of humanity. The catechist will be faithful to this double aspect of the Word which he or she proclaims.

To effectively serve this proclamation, catechists must receive proper training so that they have personally understood and assimilated this Word. Serious study of the Scriptures and the Church's doctrinal and moral teaching cannot be neglected if the catechist is to engage in this step of the process competently and effectively. Spiritual formation of the catechist is also an ongoing and absolute requisite for effective proclamation.

One possible danger in this proclamation, not unknown in our day, is that the catechist moves to this step so preoccupied with some personal agenda or issue that the content of catechesis is distorted and is presented through this prism alone. The issue may be legitimate, but if it threatens the integrity of the proclamation, then it is harmful. This can happen in a number of ways — e.g., by a catechist's obsession with a private revelation or personal devotion, or with current issues of "liberation," feminism, etc.

It is this danger which Pope John Paul II is addressing when he notes that "the disciple of Christ has the right to receive 'the Word of faith' not in mutilated, falsified, or diminished form but whole and entire, in all its rigor and vigor. Unfaithfulness on some point to the integrity of the message means a dangerous weakening of catechesis."³

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* now unfolds, in authoritative fashion, the full scope of the proclamation that must be at the heart of catechesis. It will be an excellent measuring rod for all those responsible for catechesis to ensure that a systematic, integrated, and faithful proclamation of the "mystery of faith" is realized.

Third Step: Explanation

From what I have just said it is clear that in my judgment the second step of catechesis involves a respectful and faithful proclamation of the Word of God in which the catechist is scrupulous to be a channel and instrument of something much greater than himself or herself.

In the third step, in a certain sense, the catechists' personal creativity is now more challenged and evoked so that they may help participants come to a deeper personal understanding and assimilation of the message of faith.

The explanation that will be made will, of course, be always in the light of the Church's understanding of the Word, but the catechist is challenged to find appropriate ways to "inculturate" this message so that it can be adapted to diverse groups to whom it is addressed. This will be done by utilizing appropriate pedagogical and andragogical teaching/learning techniques and by tapping into cultural points of reference that can help with the understanding of the message.

Explanation should be done in a participative manner. While the second step as I have outlined it above shows a certain deference to the primacy of God's Word, the third step will seek to "educate" — "to draw out" the meaning of that Word. This will require the active engagement of the participants, so that the relevance of the Word to their life story and to contemporary issues can be brought to light. This will aid in fostering that "maturity in faith" which is a major goal of catechesis.

This third step can make creative use of audiovisual aids, role-playing, personal research, and writing — all adapted to the capacities and abilities of the learners.

This is the step in which participants' doubts and questions need to be honestly addressed. The skillful catechist will know whether this is best done privately or if a group reflection would be helpful. The important thing is for participants to understand that Christian faith is fully reasonable and intelligent, and that, while its object transcends unaided human reason, it does not contradict or demean it but elevates and dignifies it.

This third step is perhaps a good place to urge rediscovery of legitimate "apologetics" as part of the explanation process. If such an exercise was once addressed in too polemical a fashion to fellow Christians, it is still necessary in an age of

great pluralism and many conflicting ideologies. A proper explanation in catechesis will always help participants to be able to find "a reason for your hope" (1 Pt 3:15). Our explanation will help present the credibility of the Christian faith and message as well as their special relevance to our times.

The role of memory, as mentioned in the previous chapter, should not be underestimated or neglected in this process. An explanation can very usefully include key sentences and phrases for commitment to memory. This helps deepen the assimilation process and can be a help in providing the words for future conversation on faith topics. The lack of a common religious vocabulary among Catholic students of the past two decades is a significant ecclesial and catechetical problem, which needs to be remedied by including memory exercises in this third step. Catechetical texts should include key words and a glossary of terms to assist the catechist in this task.

Explanation, however, will at its best transcend the merely intellectual and exploit the religious imagination, engaging both right- and left-lobe brain operations.⁴ The power of image, story, and symbol to help the Word have its fullest impact on the believer must never be underestimated. Jesus' own example in his rich use of parable and story should be the inspiration for the catechist in designing creative explanations of the Word.

Fourth Step: Application

Knowledge is to enhance life, and in the Christian view religious knowledge is not intended to be sterile but to lead to transformation of the individual and society. However, as Pope John Paul II points out in *Catechesi Tradendae*, "Firm and well-thought-out convictions lead to courageous and upright action."⁵ So the step of application of the content of faith presumes, in my judgment, the full implementation of the prior three steps.

In biblical and ecclesial terms, what is hoped for as a result of catechesis is a life of "witness" and "service." In the

fourth step of catechesis, as I envision it, the focus is on having the truth and knowledge acquired in the prior steps now bear fruit. This involves a deeper level of conversion in the person being catechized and a commitment to expressing this conversion in his or her lifestyle.

The concept of "witness" is deeply rooted in early Christian experience and writing, always linked to the work of the Holy Spirit in us. Jesus promised His followers: "You will receive power when the holy Spirit comes upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, throughout Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8).

This fourth step of catechesis is intended to facilitate a response to the call to be a witness for the Person of Jesus as the world's only Savior and to His way of life. This is not always easy in a culture in which there has been a great privatization of religion. People are reluctant to give public testimony to their religious beliefs, and yet this is an essential part of the vocation of the baptized person, who shares in Christ's priestly and prophetic mission.

Despite the widespread implementation of the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults, the overall number of converts to Catholicism has greatly decreased in the United States, while the number of unchurched has greatly increased. Catechists must see it as part of their task to help believers recapture their essential missionary vocation.

The concept of "witness" has renewed relevance in our day, as Pope Paul VI so trenchantly pointed out in his letter on Evangelization: "Modern man listens more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if he does listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses."⁶ The catechist must encourage and equip those served to bring to their brothers and sisters the life-transforming Good News of Jesus Christ.

"Service" is the other aspect of this fourth step of application. The Gospel image of Jesus washing the feet of His disciples sets the tone for Christian living: "If I washed your feet — / I who am Teacher and Lord — / then you must wash

Another opportunity for celebration is to observe the feasts of the saints. Most of the participants in our programs are presumably named after a recognized saint, who is to be a model, encouragement, and intercessor. If the feast of that saint can be connected appropriately to a session, it should be noted and celebrated — perhaps following the structure outlined above: reading of a passage from the saint's writings, silent reflection, and a prayer centered on some symbol appropriate to that saint.

The fifth step, then, should bring together the other four steps and give the session a unity that will facilitate the kind of total response which catechesis should seek — cognitive, affective, and behavioral. It should raise the participants to an expression of loving gratitude to that eternal communion of love into whose embrace they are journeying — Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

The fact that the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* adds to the traditional catechetical structure of creed, cult, and code a fourth major element — Christian prayer — seems to give support to the importance I would like to give to this fifth step of prayer, contemplation, and celebration in our catechetical methodology.

The *Catechism* emphasizes that the purpose of prayer is to foster a "relationship" with God (no. 2558) — "This is our ultimate goal in catechesis." If we do this well for those we serve, this may well be the most significant long-term effect of our efforts. Such a prayer relationship will open believers up to the power of God's life and love within them and enable them to live a life of true Christian witness and service.

Discussion Questions

1. The GDC (no. 141) speaks of the Church's "incomparable treasure of pedagogy in the faith" mentioning the witness of saints and the personal witness of the catechist and suggesting devotions, prayers, spiritual exercises of different

kinds (e.g., Rosary, Stations of Cross). How do I try to incorporate these various elements of the Church's "treasure of pedagogy in the faith" in my class presentations?

2. How do you understand the difference between the "inductive" and the "deductive" method in catechesis (see GDC 150)? Which approach do you prefer? Why? How would you incorporate each in a sample lesson?

3. To truly be open and receptive to the word of God in the kind of Revelation-based catechesis urged in this Chapter, there needs to be created some "space" in student's hearts and minds; some creative distance and silence from the frantic inundation of external stimuli to which they are constantly exposed. How would you try to create this holy space and distance in structuring a catechetical lesson?

4. The "mystery we proclaim" is supernatural. It reveals truths beyond the power of unaided human reason (e.g., Incarnation, Trinity, Eucharist). How do you deal with the skepticism and hesitation of students immersed in an experiential and scientific culture?

Notes

1. See *Catechesi Tradendae*, nos. 19 and 20.
2. Vatican II, Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, no. 25.
3. *Catechesi Tradendae*, no. 30.
4. See Maria Harris, *Teaching and Religious Imagination: An Essay in the Theology of Teaching* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1987).
5. Op. cit., no. 22.
6. Pope Paul VI, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, no. 41.
7. See the influential book by Thomas H. Groome *Christian Religious Education* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1980).

one another's feet. / What I just did was to give you an example: / as I have done, so you must do" (Jn 13:14-15). The Lord has made just such service the criterion for our ultimate judgment (see Mt 25:31 ff.).

Inculcating "service" in our modern society will be a countercultural challenge. It will mean challenging a consumer society that even creates artificial needs while other human brothers and sisters lack essentials. As the Catholic community moves into upper levels of education, affluence, and influence, this part of catechesis becomes even more demanding.

Much has been written in the past decade about praxis-oriented religious education.⁷ This approach has been a beneficial corrective to a too-abstract view of catechetics that did not adequately make the missing link with life and action. My reflections on this step are intended to contribute to this discussion by suggesting that our primary source for this direction might be found less in sociology or political science than in a recapturing of our own deepest scriptural and ecclesial roots. This is the reason that I prefer the scriptural terminology about "witness" and "service."

Fifth Step: Celebration

If the catechetical process begins, as I have suggested, in prayerful attentiveness and openness to the Word of God, I believe that it must also end in prayerful gratitude and praise to God.

The Eucharist is the summit and source of Christian life. It is the celebration "par excellence," but at its core it is thanksgiving — which the Greek word Eucharist means. So we say, "Let us give thanks to the Lord, our God" at the heart of every Mass.

This attitude of thanksgiving and praise is paradigmatic for all of Christian life. We look at the "wonderful things" God has done in the Creation and Redemption and are sponta-

neously impelled to prayer and praise. This must be a major part and the climax of a catechetical process and methodology that is deeply rooted in the Church's own faith and self-understanding.

Again, creative catechists will find effective ways to execute this fifth step in an inspiring way. The usual three moments of liturgical celebration might give a basic framework: proclamation of the Word, silent reflection, common response. Connected, therefore, to the theme of the particular topic being taught, a Scripture passage might be chosen and proclaimed; a period of silent reflection might follow; and then in common prayer or song, a response might be expressed. Such a framework also becomes an implicit teaching vehicle in itself to demonstrate to participants one way to structure their own prayer life.

The use of symbols can be a powerful strategy in this final step of celebration. In 1992, I was part of a large throng in St. Peter's Square, Rome, for the combined Palm Sunday and World Youth Day Liturgy. After the moving readings and rites of the day, the Holy Father announced the site for the 1992 World Youth Day in Denver, Colorado. As he then stood before the altar, a group of young people from Poland, site of the last Youth Day, came across the square carrying a large wooden cross. From the opposite direction came a group of young people from the United States, and before the Pope the large cross was passed from one group to the other. This very central symbol about the following of Christ, and of the unity of these young people in the one body of Christ, was deeply moving to the whole immense congregation.

The cross should be one of the major symbols we use in catechetical celebrations: "May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ" (Gal 6:14). Yet, I have noted how rarely catechetical texts suggest its use; there is much utilization of water, flowers, rocks, candles, etc., but great underutilization of the chief countercultural symbol of Christianity — the Cross!