

COMMENTARY ON "CATECHESIS IN OUR TIME"

By

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There is something indicative in the date of publication of the Apostolic Exhortation *Catechesi Tradendae*: October 16, 1979. It is the anniversary of the election of John Paul II to the supreme pontificate. This coincidence goes beyond merely the element of time. It is also indicative of the unmistakable imprint of his thinking, style and personal interest: "Catechesis has always been a central core in my ministry as a priest and as a bishop." (CT, 4).

At the same time *Catechesi Tradendae* is meant to be an affirmation of the happy results of the Synod of Bishops held in October 1977 on the subject "Catechesis in our time, especially that of children and young people." In real sense then it is a synthesis of the conclusions and recommendations presented by that synod. The Pope was himself a member of that synod. "...I myself had the joy of taking part in." (CT, 2). Using a conversational style, and without claiming to be exhaustive, he dwells on the most decisive aspects of catechesis, those that evoke encouragement or vigilance.

This is, of course, mainly dictated by the very nature of the document which is an apostolic exhortation: "The theme is extremely vast and the Exhortation will keep to a few only of the most topical and decisive aspects of it, as affirmation of the happy results of the Synod." (CT, 4).

CATECHESIS OR RELIGIOUS EDUCATION?

Why catechesis and not the more familiar term religious education? The question is not altogether insignificant. A change of name, after all, is always a significant event. It indicates a change of character or a change of destiny. The term religious education, although it has a familiar ring, means a lot of things to many people, each one implying a different relationship to the Church

mission. It also appears unable to get away from the altogether academic context and therefore does not allow for the many "non-school" forms of the ministry of the word.

On the other hand, the term *catechesis* is a more ancient word which appears often in the documents of the Church. The word *catechesis* is derived from a Greek word which means "to resound" or "to sound from above". It means therefore more than to instruct, which seems to be the focal point of religious education as a term. To catechize is to resound or to echo, what is resounded or echoed is the Word, the Word of the scriptures and the Word made flesh. The Church, as a catechetical community, resounds the Word. A catechist is like an echo. An echo is not a new word. It is the original word heard in different places at different times.

1. *CHRISTOCENTRIC*

The object and content of this resounding is precisely what Chapter I is all about. Catechesis centers upon the person of Christ (CT, 5). This is because catechesis is above all about the putting of the person being catechized into contract with the Person of Christ. This is one meaning of the christocentricity of catechesis. The other meaning is that catechesis is also about transmitting Christ's teaching, which is at the same time a lesson about life (CT, 6, 7). All our teaching must be with reference to Him. It is, in fact, He who teaches.

There is an important corollary to this: the catechist therefore has to efface himself or herself before Christ in order to be His faithful spokesman, resounder, or echo. Here is a call for great detachment on the part of the catechist. In addition, there is also the invitation to maintain, if we wish to be effective, a harmony between our teaching and our living: "Only in deep communion with Him will catechists find light and strength for an authentic desirable renewal of catechesis." (CT, 9).

2. *CATECHESIS IN THE COURSE OF CHURCH HISTORY*

In this Chapter II we find a series of reflections on the history of catechesis. The mission of making disciples of all nations is very much an essential part of the mission of the apostles (CT, 10). Their fellow workers in the ministry of apostleship shared in this mission. The Fathers were explicit too in considering catechetical instruction to be an essential part of their ministry (CT,

12). This same interest was taken up by the great councils especially the council of Trent: "it gave catechesis priority in its constitution and decrees. It lies at the origin of the Roman Catechism, which is also known by the name of that Council and which is a work of the first rank as a summary of Christian teaching and traditional theology for use by priests." (CT, 13).

The Exhortation draws several lessons from the foregoing:

1. Catechesis is a sacred duty and an inalienable right of the Church. It is 'a duty springing from a command given by the Lord and resting above all on those who in the New Covenant receive the call to the ministry of being pastors . . . a right: from the theological point of view every baptized person, precisely by reason of being baptized has the right to receive from the Church instruction and education enabling him or her to enter on a truly Christian life; and from the viewpoint of human rights, every human being has the right to seek religious truth and adhere to it freely . . ." (CT, 14). For this reason the Pope makes a strong protest against regimes where freedom to catechize is denied: 'But the right is being violated by many States, even to the point that imparting catechesis, having it imparted, and receiving it become punishable offences.' (CT, 14).

2. He urges all areas of the Church to spare nothing in resources of people or energy to give catechesis a priority over all other works or undertakings, even those which might have more spectacular results (CT, 15).

3. He explicitly appeals to all members of the Church, bishops; priests, religious, parents, teachers, catechists, underlining that all share this responsibility although it is a differentiated responsibility (CT, 16).

3. NATURE OF CATECHESIS

This Chapter deals with the nature of catechesis. No doubt this should be a welcome document for professional catechist searching for a more precise definition of her work and activity.

The mission of the Church is to continue the mission of Jesus, His mission of prophet, priest and servant king. The purpose of this mission to bring about the fulfillment of God's kingdom. There this three aspects to this one mission of Jesus and the Church — proclaiming and teaching, celebrating the mysteries and serving the people of the world, the ministry of worship and the ministry of

service. These are, of course, inseparably linked in reality — each implies and includes the other — but it is possible to discuss and study them separately.

Catechesis is part of the ministry of the word. This ministry takes four forms depending on circumstances and the particular ends in view (GCD, 17). These four forms of proclamation and teaching are identified as evangelization, liturgy, theology and catechesis. The GCD does not explain the relationship among these four forms. It is content to state, 'for our purpose it is important to keep these forms distinct, since they are governed by their own laws. Nevertheless they are closely bond together.' (GCD, 17). *Catechesi Tradendae* provides the explanation.

Evangelization and Catechesis (CT, 18)

"Let us, first of all, recall that there is no separation or opposition between catechesis and evangelization. Nor can the two be simply identified with each other. Instead, they have close links whereby they integrate and complement each other... the specific character of catechesis, as distinct from the initial conversion — bringing proclamation of the Gospel, has the twofold objective of maturing the initial faith and of educating the true disciple of Christ by means of a deeper knowledge and more systematic knowledge of the person and the message of our Lord Jesus Christ." (CT, 18-19).

The foregoing quotations are clear to need any further commentary. Let me just briefly re-state it. Catechesis is primarily a ministry to believers. It presupposes prior pre-evangelization, activities which aim at evolving a faith response. Evangelization proclaims the Good News of salvation to someone who, for whatever reason, has no knowledge of it or does not fully accept it. It lays a foundation for conversion of life.

Liturgy and Catechesis (CT, 23)

"Catechesis is intrinsically linked with the whole of liturgical and sacramental activity, for it is in the sacraments, especially in the eucharist, that Christ Jesus works in fullness for the transformation of human beings." (CT, 23). When this text is read together with GCD's n. 25 which describes how catechesis should "promote an active, conscious, genuine participation in the liturgy of the Church", several interesting points emerge:

(1) Catechesis is the means and the liturgy is the end. Not vice versa. We should not be carried away by catechesis that we end up exploiting the educative and formative value of liturgical

celebrations for their own sake. For these reasons *Catechesi Tradendae* says: "Catechesis always had reference to the sacraments." (23).

(2) Sacramental catechesis is best achieved through active participation in good liturgical celebrations and not merely by explaining the meaning of ceremonies.

(3) Adults should be made to recognize the importance of ongoing sacramental catechesis. Christians are in a better position to understand and appreciate the sacred mysteries only after they participate in them. In this connection, we may distinguish two kinds of sacramental catechesis: one of which prepares for the reception of the sacraments, marks only the beginning and is used for a specified period of time. This is pre-sacramental catechesis. The other, the post-sacramental catechesis which is a lifelong matter.

Theology and Catechesis (CT, 61)

Theology differs from catechesis both in terms of goals, methods, and criteria.

The goal of theology is to seek an ever fuller understanding of the gospel message through reflection on the life of Christians and formal teachings of the Church. Theology presupposes an effective catechesis which, in cooperation with the Holy Spirit, leads individual Christians and the community to maturity in faith. The more living, conscious and active the faith of the community, the richer it is as a source for theology.

Theology's method is scientific in that it approaches the sacred and human sciences critically in an analytic and systematic fashion. Catechesis, on the other hand, uses these sciences more as resources and means to better proclaim the faith.

Catechesis, of course, draws on theology, and theology draws in turn on the richness of the Church's catechetical experience. In different ways both are forms of the ministry of the word and at the service of the Church. Theology is faith seeking a fuller understanding of the gospel message, while catechesis seeks to nurture a richer living of that same message.

On the pastoral level this distinction is the measure of what qualities the catechists should have. A catechist is not expected to be a professional theologian. But he or she is expected to have a solid grasp of Catholic doctrine and worship and familiarity with Scriptures.

What then is catechesis? It is a proclamation of the faith, under the influence of and in cooperation with the Holy Spirit, that leads individual Christians and the community to maturity of faith, to a richer living of the fullness of the gospel message.

4. CONTENT

"The living source of the word of God in tradition and the scriptures" (CT, 27) constitute the source of catechesis. At the same time, from this source flow the Church teaching, liturgy and life which are, in turn, sources themselves of catechesis.

God's self-revelation is the content of catechesis. In addition to this, the content of catechesis may be extended to embrace all the ways that God's word is at work in the lives of people exercising their faith under the guidance of the magisterium. In other words, all those activities of the community and individuals that make a person's faith become living, conscious and active, through the light of instruction (GCD, 17).

The Exhortation identifies the "three important points" of an authentic catechesis: the integrity of content, the use of properly adopted pedagogical language and process to transmit the message in its entirety, and the ecumenical dimension. In this connection the issue of the criteria or norms to measure authentic catechesis confronts us.

Let me mention some of these norms:

1. Catechesis centers on the mystery of the Trinity and Christ's saving work. The spirit and content of catechesis is inspired by the axiom, "through Christ to the Father in the Holy Spirit". If catechesis loses sight of these three elements or neglects their close relationship, it is not faithful to the Christian message (GCD, 40-42). *Catechesi Tradendae* considers this as "the principle inspiring all catechetical work and all who do this work" (CT, 72).

2. Catechesis presents the Christian message in its entirety and in such a way that the inter-relationship of its parts is maintained. To expound only what people want to hear, or to explain the Christian message in such a fragmentary and disjointed way that the faithful lose a sense of mystery, and reverence fails the catechetical mission. The Creeds — the Apostles' and the Nicene — are examples of brief but comprehensive statements of the Christian message. For this reason *Catechesi Tradendae* calls our attention to this point: "In order that the sacrificial offering of his or her faith should be perfect, the person who becomes a 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 and putting at risk the results that Christ and the ecclesial community have a right to expect from it." (C.T., 30).

3. **Catechesis recognizes a certain hierarchy of truths.** A careful reading of the GCD brings about the point that hierarchy of truths does not mean that some truths pertain less to faith itself than others do, rather, that some truths of faith enjoy a higher priority inasmuch as other truths are based on and illumined by them.

4. **Authentic catechesis adapts to the circumstances of those being catechized:** Catechesis must take learning theory and other factors — cultural, sociological, psychological, which influence human behavior and values into account. In a catechetical context, effective communication is as important as doctrinal orthodoxy. This is what *Catechesi Tradendae* means when it says: "It can happen that in the present situation of catechesis, reasons of method or pedagogy suggest that the communication of the riches of the content should be organized in one way rather than another." (C.T., 31).

5. **Catechesis interprets the present life in the light of revelation and at the same time disposes people for the world to come.** "In time past, it began," as GCD states, "made progress, and in Christ reached its highest point; in the present time it displays its force and awaits its consummation in the future." (GCD, 44). Compare this with C.T.'s no. 22: "This revelation is not however isolated from life and it illumines the whole life with the light of the Gospel, to inspire it or to question it."

6. **The bishop has the primary responsibility for catechesis in the diocese, and under him the pastor is directly responsible for the local church.** *Catechesi Tradendae* has this to say: "You (bishops) are, beyond all others, the ones primarily responsible for catechesis, the catechists par excellence." (C.T., 63). When this text is read together with the other recent documents of the Church — its meaning and impact emerge in bolder relief. The decree of Vatican II on the Pastoral Office of Bishops describes their responsibility in regard to catechesis (nos. 13-14). The *Message to the People* published at the close of the 1977 Synod of Bishops states, "the bishop has the primary role in the catechetical activity of the local Church. It is his task to coordinate the activity of all who dedicate themselves to catechize in his own local church. Along with him, all their own ways must collaborate in the ministry of catechesis" (n. 14). So also the parish priest. Although he holds

"the office of direct responsibility" he too is answerable to the bishop. For one, the parish priest should see to it that the diocesan catechetical directives are implemented.

Catechesi Tradendae in Chapter II precisely underlines this point when it traces catechesis in the course of the Church's history from the teaching of the apostles and their fellow workers, the Letters and Gospels, the instructions and treatises of the Fathers of the Church, the Councils, the missions, etc. From this the Exhortation draws the conclusion that catechesis is a duty and a right of the Church in every country. It is the priority task to which the Church must devote her best resources.

5. CATECHESIS: LIFE-LONG PROCESS

Chapter V underlines some observations about the special characteristics that catechesis assumes at the different stages of life. What is implied in this Chapter is the life-long process involved in catechesis. There is, accurately speaking, no time or situation in life when catechesis is not helpful and, in some circumstances, essential. It has now become almost common place to say that catechesis extends from cradle to grave. All ages and circumstances of life are moments for catechesis.

Consequently, dioceses and parishes should make an honest and concerted effort to begin catechesis at the earliest possible stage and extend it to, literally speaking, the moment of death. Special conditions of life also need to be taken into account: catechesis for parenthood, family catechesis, catechesis for the sacraments, young adult catechesis, catechesis for the engaged, the remarried, the widowed, working and business people, catechesis for civic responsibilities — just to mention a few by way of example.

There are many things, insights deserving of mention and consideration in this Chapter. Permit me to comment on the **adult catechesis**.

Adult catechesis should not be considered important only by reason of its relationship to the catechesis of children, that is, adults must be catechized so that they can catechize the young, or that parent and teacher education are the whole of adult catechesis — though we should all recognize that they are certainly valid and important forms of adult catechesis. In truth, the primary reason for adult catechesis — its first and essential objective — is to help adults themselves grow to maturity of a faith as members of both the church and society. The GCD views adult catechesis as the

summit of the entire catechetical enterprise. Listen to St. Paul: "This is the Christ we proclaim while we admonish all men and teach them in the full measure of wisdom, hoping to make every man complete in Christ" (Col. 1:28).

Why is adult catechesis the chief form of catechesis? In addition to their role as teachers of the young, adult Christians are capable of mature faith. It is their lives that gives the example of gospel values to the young members of the Christian community and the rest of society. It is they who strongly influence the way in which children perceive faith.

It is essential, then, that adults express gospel values by living with the hope and joy that come with faith. The Church, for its part must encourage its adult members to grow in faith and must give them opportunities to do so. In this context, it is easy to understand why adult catechesis is genuinely the summit, center and chief form of catechesis. The only conclusion possible is that the Catholic Church at the national, diocesan and parish levels must reflect this priority in their budgets and programs.

6-7. MEANS, METHODS AND PARTICULAR PROBLEMS

Chapters VI — VII provides a series of considerations about means, methods and particular problems. Regarding the communications media: "I think of the great possibilities offered by the means of communication and the means of group communication: television, radio, the press, records, tape-recordings — the whole series of audio-visual means." (CT, 46). The principal focus however is on the various places and occasions where people gather: pilgrimages, missions, Bible-groups, ecclesial basic communities, Catholic action groups, prayer and meditation groups. The possibilities for diversity and complementarity of the forms of catechesis associated with these places, occasions and gatherings should be explored with a view to developing the three dimensions of the Christian life: "word, memorial and witness-doctrine, celebration and commitment in living — which the Synod's Message to the People of God emphasized" (CT, 47).

A special place is given to the homily (at Mass and in connection with the sacraments). The homily is a special form of catechesis, but not the only one. Indeed it is and should be "the source and fulfillment" (CT, 48) of all catechesis, but it should be the climax of all other forms which take place in a variety of circumstances according to a variety of need and opportunity.

The document points out also precise requirements in connection with catechetical books:

"a) they must be linked with the real life of the generation to which they are addressed, showing close acquaintance with its anxieties and questionings, struggles and hopes;

b) they must try to speak a language comprehensible into the generation in question;

c) they must make a point of giving the whole message of Christ and His Church, without neglecting or distorting anything, and in expounding it they will follow a line and structure that highlights what is essential:

d) they must really aim to give to those who use them a better knowledge of the mysteries of Christ, aimed at true conversion and a life more in conformity with God's will." (CT, 49).

The relationship between catechesis and culture is dealt with in the middle of Chapter VII. Pope John Paul warns against two extremes: one, "the Gospel message cannot be purely and simply isolated from the culture in which it was first inserted, . . . nor, without serious loss, from the cultures in which it has already been expressed down the centuries" and, two, ". . . There would be no catechesis if it were the Gospel that had to change when it came into contact with cultures." (CT 53). Catechesis cannot be reduced to culture. For the Gospel does not spring spontaneously from any culture. While it "takes flesh" in culture, it is ever beyond it, rectifying many of its elements and challenging it with its power.

8. THE JOY OF FAITH IN A TROUBLED WORLD

Chapter VIII faces the handicap of the very widespread indifference to religion, a challenge which must be faced with a calm affirmation of Christian identity. This is the task of catechesis — to develop a Christian and Catholic identity which is serenely grounded in the hope of seeing "Him who is invisible" (Heb. 11:27).

Number 58 touches on the problem of reductionism. Just as the Gospel cannot be reduced to culture, neither can the pedagogy of faith be reduced to educational pedagogy. For the former is concerned with communicating God's Revelation. On the use of language, *Catechesi Tradendae* says: "For catechesis has a press-

ing obligation to speak a language suited to today's children and young people in general and to many other categories of people . . . But there is good reason for recalling here that catechesis cannot admit any language that would result in altering the substance of the content of the Creed, under any pretext whatever, even a pretended scientific one." (CT, 59).

9. THE TASK CONCERNS ALL

This Chapter is a paternal exhortation and a lively encouragement to all those working in catechesis. But special emphasis is made to three particular points: the catechetical task of the bishops, the parish as the pre-eminent place for catechesis and the primacy of family catechesis.

To the bishops the Pope says: "... You are beyond all others the ones primarily responsible for catechesis, the catechists par excellence let the concern to foster active and effective catechesis yield to no other care whatever in any way." (CT, 63). This stems from the fact that the bishop is to take on "the chief management of catechesis" because "your principal role will be to bring about and maintain in your Churches a real passion for catechesis, a passion embodied in a pertinent and effective organization, putting into operation the necessary personnel, means and equipment, and also financial resources." (CT, 63).

"The parish community must continue to be the prime mover and pre-eminent place for catechesis." (CT, 67). While catechetics takes place in other situations like family, school, youth clubs, etc., all these channels ultimately converge in the parish. The parish should become the focus, the concrete image of the unity of the Church.

While the parish is the principle of unity of catechetical activity, the family is its foundation: "Family catechesis therefore precedes, accompanies and enriches all other forms of catechesis" (CT, 68). Other agencies like the diocese, parish and school provide the much needed support to the family. A very strong statement is given to Catholic schools: "This of course concerns first and foremost the Catholic school: it would no longer deserve this title if, no matter how much it shone for its high level of teaching in non-religious matters, there were justification for reproaching it for negligence

or deviation in strictly religious education. Let it not be said that such education will always be given implicitly and indirectly. The special character of the Catholic school, the underlying reason for it, is precisely the quality of the religious instruction integrated into the education of the pupils." (CT, 69).

CONCLUSION

The role of the Holy Spirit in catechesis is defined here. The Holy Spirit is the "Teacher within", catechesis is the work of the Holy Spirit. This is because "catechesis, which is growth in faith and the maturing of the Christian life towards its fullness is... a work of the Holy Spirit, a work which he alone can initiate and sustain in the Church" (CT, 72).

Consequently the Holy Father urges catechists and those being catechized to look to the Holy Spirit as the source of evangelizing dynamism and the source of the life of the disciple. In this connection the catechist must be like Mary, "the Virgin of Pentecost" (CT, 73), the mother and model of the disciple. This living intimacy with the Holy Spirit will bring about a Catechetical awakening which is nothing else but "to know the mystery of Christ better, and and to bear witness to it." (CT, 72).