

# We Have But One Teacher, Jesus Christ

## Catechesis in Our Time

**ISSUE:** What is the Church's view of catechesis?

**DISCUSSION:** Effective catechesis involves a deepening relationship with Jesus Christ and a growing knowledge of His Church's teachings. The goal is a vital relationship with Jesus Christ and His Mystical Body, the Church, so that the person in turn may bear effective witness to Christ in this life and share eternal happiness in heaven in the next. The achievement of this goal, which only occurs in cooperation with God's grace, may be furthered by sound catechisms, good priests and teachers, and dynamic parish programs. However, the most important component is the instruction and example given at home, the domestic Church, upon which everything else builds.

### What Is Catechesis?

In his apostolic exhortation *Catechesi Tradendae* (CT) (Catechesis in Our Time), Pope John Paul II provides the following definition:

[C]atechesis is an education of children, young people and adults in the faith, which includes especially the teaching of Christian doctrine imparted, generally speaking, in an organic and systematic way, with a view to initiating the hearers into the fullness of Christian life (no. 18; cf. Catechism, no. 5).

As Bishop John J. Myers of Peoria, Illinois, wrote:

When we teach, we should first clearly present the church's teachings. People want to know and have a right to know what the church teaches and not merely to be presented with theological opinions, however clever (even our own). It is the Gospel as entrusted to the church, which has the privileged assistance of the Holy Spirit and in the proclamation of which the Holy Spirit acts in a very profound manner.<sup>1</sup>

Catechesis involves nourishing the seed of faith that the person received at Baptism. Catechesis in one sense comes after evangelization, just as you get to know someone better only after you're introduced. Yet, the evangelical call to know and commit ourselves to Christ must permeate all catechesis. And this is particularly true today, where there are many who have been baptized, but have not yet committed their lives to Christ and are ignorant of His teachings.

The "springtime of faith" that Pope John Paul II envisions as the fruit of Vatican II and the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000 has a decidedly catechetical thrust. Catechism, no. 8 provides that "periods of renewal in the Church are also intense moments of catechesis." In his apostolic letter *Tertio Millennio Adveniente*, Pope John Paul II says that the Jubilee 2000 preparation provides an "opportune moment for a renewed appreciation of catechesis in its original meaning as the Apostles' teaching (Acts 2:42) about the person of Jesus Christ and His mystery of salvation" (no. 42). It seems appropriate, then, to do everything we can now to promote effective catechesis.

The principal documents on this subject, besides Scripture and the Catechism, are Pope John Paul II's apostolic exhortation *Catechesi Tradendae* (CT), the 1971 *General Catechetical Directory* (GCD), the 1997 *General Directory for Catechesis* (GDC), and the 1979 *National* (i.e., U.S.) *Catechetical Directory* (NCD).

## Who Is Communicated?

[A]t the heart of catechesis we find, in essence, a Person, the Person of Jesus of Nazareth... [Therefore,] [t]he primary and essential object of catechesis is... to reveal in the Person of Christ the whole of God's eternal design reaching fulfillment in that Person.... Accordingly, the definitive aim of catechesis is to put people not only in touch but in communion, in intimacy, with Jesus Christ: only he can lead us to the love of the Father in the Spirit and make us share in the life of the Holy Trinity (CT 5; cf. Catechism, no. 425).

Catechesis must aim to put people in communion with Jesus Christ (CT 5), and thus should be centered on Christ, the “alpha and omega” of our faith (Rev. 22:13). It also follows that Christ's teaching, and not the opinions or agendas of the catechist, must be communicated (CT 6, 52). Pope John Paul II reminds catechists to apply to themselves the mysterious words of Jesus: “My teaching is not mine, but his who sent me” (Jn. 7:16). Catechists, like Saint John the Baptist, must humbly decrease, so that God's own Word, which is “living and active” (Heb. 4:12), may increase and penetrate people's hearts (cf. Jn. 3:30).

If catechesis were only abstract teaching, then the goal would be imparting knowledge. But catechesis is much more! It is the formation of effective Catholics. Therefore, the goal of the catechist must always be to set hearts aflame for Christ: “Did not our hearts burn within us while he talked to us on the road, while he opened to us the scriptures?” (Lk. 24:32).

## Who Communicates?

The work of catechesis is a collaborative effort of the People of God, yet the decisive role of parents is singled out in Church documents. For example, canon 774 §2 provides that “[p]arents above others are obliged to form their children in the faith and practice of the Christian life by word and example.”

Pope John Paul II teaches that “[t]he family's catechetical activity has a special character, which is in a sense irreplaceable” (CT 68). He then points out that this principle has been affirmed by the Church for centuries, and received particular emphasis at Vatican II.

The central document of Vatican II, *Lumen Gentium* (Dogmatic Constitution on the Church), explains: “In what might be regarded as the domestic Church, the parents, by word and example, are the first heralds of the faith with regard to their children” (no. 11). And then in *Gravissimum Educationis* (GE) (Decree on Christian Education), this point is further clarified:

As it is the parents who have given life to their children, on them lies the *gravest obligation of educating their family*. They must therefore be recognized as being primarily and principally responsible for their education. *The role of parents in education is of such importance that it is almost impossible to provide an adequate substitute....* It is therefore above all in the Christian family, inspired by the grace and the responsibility of the sacrament of matrimony, that children should be taught to know and worship God and to love their neighbor, in accordance with the faith which they have received in earliest infancy in the sacrament of Baptism (GE 3, footnote omitted, emphasis added).

Parents may be assisted in their task by other catechists, be they clergy, religious, or laity. Their duty is not only to impart authentic Church teaching, but also to be “living witnesses,” to manifest in their lives what they are communicating to the children (GCD 35; cf. 1 Thess. 2:8). Children should be exposed to good role models whenever possible, such as through introduction to saints' lives, but also through interaction with outstanding Catholic men and women. The point is that *all of us*—and especially children—need to see how the Gospel is changing people's lives.

## How Communicated?

Our sacred religion hinges on the revelation of Jesus Christ, who is “the way, and the truth, and the life” (Jn. 14:6). We're not born with the knowledge of Christ, nor will we naturally come to a knowledge of Him unless He is proclaimed to us. We need to be taught the truths of our faith. As the Ethiopian eunuch replied to Philip, after being asked if he understood the Scripture he was reading, “How can I, unless some one guides me?” (Acts 8:31).

Life experiences may demonstrate to us our need for Christ and His Church. Further, once the faith is accepted and learned, it may inform our experiences. However, “no one can arrive at the whole truth on the basis solely of some simple private experience, that is to say, without an adequate explanation of Christ, who is ‘the way,

and the truth, and the life” (CT 22, quoting Jn. 14:6).

In presenting the Catholic faith, a catechist must communicate the truth faithfully and in a manner adapted to the person’s age and culture (cf. 1 Cor. 9:22). The teacher should manifest a “dynamic orthodoxy.” The teaching should be *dynamic*, since “routine, with its refusal to accept any change” is “dangerous for catechesis” and “leads to stagnation, lethargy, and eventual paralysis” (CT 17). Yet the teaching must always be *orthodox*, faithfully presenting what the Church teaches “in all its rigor and vigor” (CT 30). The catechist must reject improvisation as “equally dangerous” and the cause of “confusion” and the “destruction of unity” (CT 17).

Effective catechesis must be complete and systematic. Even when dealing with young children, catechesis should reveal, in an elementary way, *all* the principal mysteries of the faith in a way that allows the child to see how the various teachings form an organic whole, centered on Christ (GCD 38-39, 118; NCD 47, 176; CT 30, 31, 37, 49; GDC 97-100). It must promote a complete Christian initiation (CT 21), so that all the dimensions of the Christian life (e.g., liturgy, morality, social justice, etc.) are integrated.

Catechetical programs must be free from private opinion, ideology, or agenda, and present the unadulterated deposit of faith with conviction (e.g., CT 52, 61; Catechism, nos. 85-87, 890, 2039). The focus must be on essentials, and not on disputed theological points. In other words, catechetical tools must be at the service of the teaching Church, following the sure guidance of the Magisterium.

Memorization plays an important role in catechesis. The Holy Father encourages the memorization of “the words of Jesus, of important Bible passages, of the Ten Commandments, of the formulas of the profession of faith [i.e., Creeds], of the liturgical texts, of the essential prayers, of key doctrinal ideas, etc.,” calling this “a real need” in the Church today (CT 55). He further explains:

The blossoms... of faith and piety do not grow in the desert places of a memory-less catechesis. What is essential is that the texts that are memorized must at the same time be taken in and gradually understood in depth, in order to become a source of Christian life on the personal and community level (*ibid.*).

The goal of all catechetical activity is the conversion of hearts, so that the person may respond to the Lord’s call with heroic generosity. Young people particularly need to be challenged to sanctity today. The desire to make the Gospel accessible to youth is misguided if the call to repent and follow Jesus (cf. Mk. 1:15) is in any way watered down.

When the young man asked Jesus, “[W]hat good deed must I do, to obtain eternal life?” (Mt. 19:16), Jesus looked at him with love and personally invited the young man to follow Him without reserve (Mt. 19:21; cf. Jn. 14:6).

### **What Is to Be Taught?**

Any sound catechetical program will provide an effective treatment of the following topics, since they are the principal elements of the Christian message:

1. The Trinitarian mystery; three Persons in one God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.
2. Creation of the world from nothing; existence of angels; special creation of man.
3. Jesus Christ as the Son of God, true God and true man.
4. Christ as Savior and Redeemer of the world, who through His death and Resurrection offers eternal life to all men and women.
5. Presence of the Holy Spirit as the Lord and giver of life; His special presence in the Church, continuing Christ’s work in the world.
6. The Catholic Church as founded by Christ, possessing the deposit of faith, the sacraments, the ministries inherited from the apostles, and the fullness of the ordinary means of salvation for all people.
7. The Church as being “in” the world, but not “of” the world, and never conforming to it; her Christ-given mission to bring the message of salvation to all, with heaven, the salvific goal she shares with all people, kept always in view.

8. The Pope and the bishops as having the office of teaching, sanctifying, and governing the Church, and enjoying the gift of infallibility in guiding the Church when they exercise supreme teaching authority in matters of faith and morals, whether through the ordinary Magisterium (definitive teaching of the Pope and the bishops in union with him around the world), or through the extraordinary Magisterium: (a) through a formal, conciliar definition as at the Council of Trent (cf. *Lumen Gentium* 25) or (b) through an *ex cathedra* pronouncement of the Pope, such as Mary's Immaculate Conception; submission to the Magisterium is required even with respect to non-*ex cathedra* teachings.
9. The sacraments, as signifying the gift of grace and the faith of the Christian community, and as the actions of Christ from whom they receive their power.
10. The Eucharist as the center and heart of Christian life, a commemoration and re-presentation of Christ's one and only sacrifice on the Cross. Transubstantiation and the Real and abiding Presence of Christ in the Blessed Sacrament.
11. Effect of original sin as arising from the personal sin of one man at the dawn of history through the urging of the devil; personal sin as the rejection of God's commands or love, involving exterior or interior acts contrary to God's law; distinction between mortal and venial sin.
12. The doctrine of grace and the means of obtaining it.
13. The fact that human freedom must be exercised in conformity with moral law, i.e., the natural law, the Ten Commandments, and the teachings of the Church.
14. The Blessed Ever-Virgin Mary, who occupies in the Holy Church the place which is highest after Christ; immaculately conceived and gloriously assumed into heaven, Mother of God and Mother of the Church.
15. The fact that Christians draw inspiration from the heroic example of Mary and the saints, look for fellowship in their communion, and seek their intercession before God.
16. Death, judgment (individual and general), heaven, hell, and purgatory, and the resurrection of the body.

### **Questions for Reflection or Group Discussion**

1. Pope John Paul II says that the catechesis of adults is "a concern imposed with vigor and urgency by present experiences throughout the world," and that it is the "principal" form of catechesis (CT 43). What can I do to deepen my own knowledge of the Catholic faith and deepen my relationship with Christ and His Church?
2. (For parents) Read Catechism, no. 2226. How can I make my home more fully a "domestic Church" where my children may receive a sound formation in the Catholic faith?
3. Catechesis necessarily involves teaching all the truths of the Catholic faith. What else does it entail? What is the relationship between evangelization and catechesis? (See Catechism, nos. 426-29.)

<sup>1</sup> Most Rev. John J. Myers, "On Sharing Difficult Truths," *Origins* (February 27, 1997), vol. 26, 592.

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