



Catechesis and Liturgy: Harmony or Fragmentation?

The 2009 theme for Catechetical Sunday, “Catechesis and the Proclamation of the Word,” provides us with a wonderful opportunity to give special attention to the relationship between catechesis and liturgy in our ministry. In the *National Directory for Catechesis* (NDC), the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) describes this relationship: “in the Church’s mission of evangelization, catechesis and Liturgy are intimately connected” (§ 33 [Washington, DC: USCCB, 2005]).

Unfortunately, however, the intimate relationship between catechesis and liturgy is not always evident in our ministry. There has been an unintended but real “disconnect” on the pastoral level between catechesis and liturgy, and between catechists and liturgists. In fact, the *General Directory for Catechesis* (GDC) identifies this relationship as one of the problematic areas of our ministry in recent years, affirming that, although “catechesis is intrinsically bound to every liturgical and sacramental action,” it is nevertheless often the case that

frequently . . . the practice of catechetics testifies to a weak and fragmentary link with the liturgy: limited attention to liturgical symbols and rites, scant use of the liturgical fonts, catechetical courses with little or no connection with the liturgical year; the marginalization of liturgical celebrations in catechetical programs. (GDC, no. 30 [Washington, DC: USCCB, 1997])

The relationship between catechesis and liturgy is integral to our catechetical ministry. The NDC points out that “catechesis both precedes the Liturgy and springs from it” (§ 33). Given the fragmentation of the link that exists in practice between catechesis and liturgy, it is important that catechetical leaders work to overcome this fragmentation and seek to restore this intimate relationship. This article highlights some ways to accomplish this so that we can better lead people into the liturgical and sacramental life of the Church.

Catechesis for Liturgical Symbols and Rites

One of the critiques mentioned by the GDC is the limited catechetical attention given to liturgical rites. How many of our children, youth, and adults are aware of the rich treasury of liturgical prayer in our Church? Our liturgical life is not one-dimensional, focusing on the Mass alone. We do of course have the Mass and sacraments. But we also have many other liturgical rites, including celebrations of the Word outside of Mass, Morning and Evening Prayer, numerous liturgical blessings (see the *Book of Blessings*, or *Catholic Household Blessings and Prayers* from the USCCB), rituals for celebration of the Eucharist outside of Mass, and non-sacramental penitential services (samples are provided in Appendix II of the *Rite of Penance*).

One way to increase the catechesis for liturgical rites is to provide intentional formation that enables catechists to learn about the rich

repertoire of liturgical prayer in the Church and familiarizes them with the variety of ritual sources. Formation of this nature can enable catechists to feel comfortable with ritual books and with preparing ritual prayer. Even more importantly, it can also help them understand that liturgical prayer plays a powerful formative role in catechesis. The role that liturgical prayer plays in catechesis is often underestimated or misunderstood. As a result, liturgical prayer can be overlooked in catechesis, sometimes overshadowed by a preference for prayers designed by an individual or those taken from journals or other catechetical resources. Yet the documents of the Church have urged catechists to take advantage of the formative power of liturgical prayer. For example, the *Directory for Masses with Children* states that “even in the case of children, the liturgy itself always exerts its own inherent power to instruct,” and the *Lectionary for Masses with Children* asserts that “the liturgy has the power to form children and all believers in the paschal mystery” (*Directory for Masses with Children*, in *Masses with Children*, Liturgy Documentary Series 12 [Washington, DC: USCCB, 1996], no. 12; Introduction, *Lectionary for Masses with Children* [Washington, DC: USCCB, 1991], no. 21).

Another way for catechesis to introduce people to the rich treasury of liturgical prayer is to include opportunities throughout the year for the faithful to participate fully, consciously, and actively in a variety of these liturgical celebrations. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* reminds us that the liturgy is the “privileged place for catechizing the People of God” (no. 1074 [2nd ed.; Washington, DC: USCCB—Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2000]). For example, Morning Prayer is an admirable way to begin prayer for children and youth in schools. Those who come to a parish for religious formation in the evenings can begin by gathering in the worship space for Evening Prayer. Evening Prayer is in fact an appropriate form of liturgical prayer for many groups associated with a parish, whether they gather for committee meetings, rehearsals, or other activities. Finally, many events of

our personal lives—such as birthdays, meetings, meals, sickness, or travel—can be marked through the celebration of blessings found in the *Book of Blessings* or *Catholic Household Blessings and Prayers* (see *Book of Blessings* [Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1989]; USCCB, *Catholic Household Blessings and Prayers*, rev. ed. [Washington, DC: USCCB, 2007]). In other words, leading people into the liturgical life of the Church requires knowing that the rich treasury of liturgical prayer is a resource for marking not only sacramental moments but also other moments of time, including the ordinary events of our lives.

The disconnect between catechesis and liturgy can affect the way catechesis is done—its goals and objectives—as well as catechetical structures. This is especially true now that the Church has been given a new model for catechesis—namely, the baptismal catechumenate (see GDC, nos. 88-91; NDC, § 35.D). If this model is indeed to inspire all forms of catechesis in the Church, then everyone involved in catechetical ministry must be challenged to embrace this new vision. Dioceses need to provide formation that leads catechists toward intimate familiarity with the objectives and dynamics of the baptismal catechumenate, as well as the impact that this model has on the Church’s catechetical structures and goals. At the same time, those involved with the catechumenate need to be formed with respect to the nature, methods, and goals of catechesis.

We should also give more attention to the use of the primary liturgical symbols in catechesis. Catechists need formation that draws their attention to the primary liturgical symbols of the Church: the assembly, water, light, the crucifix, oil, the laying-on of hands, the white garment, and bread and wine. The fragmented connection between catechesis and liturgy is evident when secondary symbols are allowed to overshadow these primary symbols. The dominant primary liturgical symbols should be taught, reflected upon, and explored in terms of their many levels of meaning. Catechists also need to understand that these symbols can have a great impact on

faith formation when they dominate the environment of catechetical spaces, especially as they are set out in relationship to the Word.

Lastly, the fragmented link between catechesis and liturgy is evident in sacramental programs. This is especially apparent when the catechesis for a sacrament has no direct relationship to the meaning of the sacrament as found in the ritual text and set forth in the ritual actions, symbols, and prayers of the rite. The NDC highlights the fundamental principles for the sacramental catechesis that dioceses and parishes should offer (NDC, § 35.B). Many of these principles challenge the way we have done sacramental catechesis in the past, especially those principles that emphasize a new context for sacramental catechesis—the community—and that stress that the content for sacramental catechesis that should focus “primarily on . . . the symbols, rituals, and prayers contained in the rite for each sacrament” (NDC, § 35.B).

Catechesis and Liturgical Fonts

Too many people today think that “history” means what happened thirty years ago, or that a “tradition” is something done for at least two years in a row. In matters that pertain to the Church, this situation is called “ecclesial amnesia.” One of the weaknesses in the relationship between catechesis and liturgy is “scant use of liturgical fonts” (GDC, no. 30). “Fonts” refers not to baptismal fonts, but rather to the liturgical sources at the foundation of the Church’s liturgical tradition in many forms: prayers, music, and art. Ecclesial amnesia is especially manifest in the national Assessment of Catholic Religious Education (ACRE) results, which show that, for students in both schools and religious education programs, the lowest scores occur in the areas of history and liturgy.¹

¹ John J. Convey, *What Our Children Know About Their Faith* (Washington, DC: National Catholic Educational Association, forthcoming).

Obviously, diocesan catechist certification programs must do more to incorporate an understanding of the Church’s liturgical history and tradition. The history of the Mass and the sacraments, the origin of symbols and gestures, and the importance of understanding “*lex orandi, lex credendi*” (“the law of prayer is the law of belief”) are just some topics that can provide catechists with a solid foundation for handing on the Church’s liturgical heritage to our children, youth, and adults.

Catechesis has always had an intimate relationship with sacred art, music, and architecture. Before the printing press, cathedrals served as living catechisms, handing on the faith through images, stained glass windows, sculpture, and sacred space. Catechists’ formation should better enable them to use liturgical art, music, and architecture as sources of catechesis. The NDC, after pointing out that “sacred art . . . has both a liturgical and catechetical purpose,” encourages dioceses and parishes to develop catechesis that “revives the tradition of using great works of art, such as music, stained glass windows, paintings, mosaics, and sculpture to instruct the faithful on the fundamental truths of the faith” (NDC, § 37.B).

Liturgical music is especially important for catechesis and serves “a distinct catechetical purpose” (NDC, § 37.B). Yet liturgical music can be problematic in catechetical programs when music is chosen for entertainment instead of worship, for its contemporary nature instead of its liturgical purpose, or for amusement rather than the participation of the assembly. And we still have far to go to help people understand that we sing the liturgy, not “sing at” the liturgy.

Dioceses should provide formation for catechists to help them understand the role of music in the Church’s liturgical and sacramental celebrations. Catechists need to be led to appreciate the importance of the words of the songs and how these can be a source of catechesis. They need to know how to choose appropriate music for the different parts of the liturgy. They must aim to catechize people so that they participate

fully in the liturgy through sung prayer. They also need to develop a historical consciousness so that they can hand on to others the Church's musical tradition, including traditional seasonal hymns, chants, and psalmody.

Catechesis and the Liturgical Year

Calendars play a major role in catechesis. We use the yearly calendar to plan our catechetical year: classes, meetings, events, and so on. We coordinate this catechetical calendar with the parish calendar and the diocesan calendar. But what impact does the liturgical calendar have on catechetical ministry? The GDC notes that a major weakness is "catechetical courses with little or no connection with the liturgical year" (no. 30). This weakness can be easily overcome by learning to harmonize the liturgical calendar with catechetical ministry. Such harmony means more than just taking out an Advent wreath during Advent, or scheduling the Stations of the Cross during Lent.

Catechesis for the liturgical year should challenge superficial understandings of liturgical seasons and lead people, year by year, to a more profound appropriation of the Paschal Mystery in their lives as it unfolds through the various liturgical seasons. Catechists can accomplish this task using all of the sources of catechesis (liturgical, scriptural, natural, and ecclesial), some advanced planning, and a little creative imagination.

For example, the diocesan office in Orlando, Florida, prepares special interactive workshops on the liturgical seasons for its parish catechetical leaders so that they in turn can implement these workshops in their parish programs. In a workshop on preparation for Advent, several rooms are set aside, one for each Sunday. Drawing on the Scripture readings for the Sunday assigned to a given room, leaders create in the room an environment associated with that Sunday, inundating the space with the symbols and images from the Sunday readings. After a group enters a given room, the readings are proclaimed. The proclamation of the readings is followed by periods for

reflection, catechesis, and an age-appropriate catechetical activity. After each group completes this experience for the First Sunday of Advent, it moves on to the catechetical experience for the next Sunday. Reflecting on the Sundays of Advent in this way allows each group to actually "journey" into the Advent season. Orlando's diocesan office presents workshops based on similar activities for the other liturgical seasons, especially the Triduum. Diocesan formation like this can assist catechetical leaders in leading children, youth, and adults in their parish to experience more fully a Church that "lives and celebrates the mystery of Christ" in its liturgy throughout the year (NDC, § 37.A).

Catechetical leaders can connect the liturgical year with catechesis by other means as well. A parish can schedule eucharistic celebrations on important days in the liturgical year, such as significant memorials, feast days, and solemnities. Catechesis on diversity in, or the universality of, the Church can make use of the celebrations of the saints, such as the Memorial of the Korean Martyrs (September 20), the Memorial of the Vietnamese Martyrs (November 24), the Feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe (December 12), the Memorial of St. John Neumann (January 5; an American saint), and the Memorial of the Japanese Martyrs (February 6).

Coordinating catechesis with the liturgical year may mean presenting the catechetical textbook's chapters out of order. Catechists thus need to know that they cannot be slaves to the textbook. Coordinating catechesis with the liturgical year does require careful planning, but the result is worthwhile. Catechists who make full use of the liturgical year end up doing more than just teaching about the different liturgical seasons; they in fact use the liturgical seasons to evangelize, leading people to experience meaning through liturgical prayer, scripture, symbol, gestures, catechesis, and active participation.

Catechesis and the Proclamation of the Word

The NDC reminds us that “catechesis and Liturgy originate in the faith of the Church” (NDC, § 33). The theme of Catechetical Sunday in 2009, “Catechesis and the Proclamation of the Word,” calls us as catechists and catechetical leaders to treasure the intimate relationship

between catechesis and liturgy. It reminds us that when catechesis contradicts liturgy, our best intentions to form people in the faith are rendered futile. It challenges us to do all that we can to overcome the “weak and fragmentary link” between the two, so that the Church’s mission of evangelization can be fulfilled.

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