



Catechesis: “Teaching What God Has Taught Us”

Evangelization and Catechesis

Freely out of love God the Trinity created human beings with the intention of calling them to become the children of the Father through Christ, his Son, in the Holy Spirit. Human beings are the privileged object of God’s love and have been created from the beginning with a *supernatural vocation* to share in God’s inner life, to enter into communion with the Trinity. (See Eph 1:3ff.; Col 1:15ff.; Gal 4:4ff.; 1 Jn 4:7ff.¹) In God’s plan of salvation, the Church is the mystery of the personal union and communion of human beings with the divine Trinity initiated by faith. This means that the Church is an organically structured communion brought together by a sharing in the unity of the Trinity, which endows the Church, as a communion, with invisible and visible elements, and thus creates her to be the “sacrament of salvation.”

The union with the life of the Trinity that creates the communion of the Church comes about through the Eucharist, where Christ gives us himself to form us into his Body, the Church. It is the vertical communion of the Church with the Trinity, brought about in the Eucharist, that in turn creates the horizontal communion among the members of the Church. The Church is in essence a *communion* created by participation in the life of the Trinity through the Eucharist: “the

Church is built up through sacramental communion with the Son of God who was sacrificed for our sake” (Pope John Paul II, *On the Eucharist [Ecclesia de Eucharistia]* [Washington, DC: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB), 2003], no. 21).

Because the Church is founded on communion with the Son of God, the origin and the final goal of the Church lie in the mystery of the Trinity. This reality—the Church as the community of humankind called into and actually sharing in the communion of the Triune God—was planned by God from eternity. The Church is foreshadowed from the very creation of humankind, because the human race from the first moments of creation has been called to communion with God by “adopted sonship” (see Eph 1:3ff.; Col 1:15ff.; Gal 4:4ff.; 1 Jn 4:7ff.). The Church is then intrinsic to the salvation of the human race, that is, to fulfillment of the unique supernatural vocation to which human beings as creatures of God are called—to communion with the Trinity. This vertical communion (with the Trinity) happens in and through the horizontal communion (the Church) that it brings about.

The act of faith, brought about by God’s grace, that initiates human beings into communion with the Trinity comes through hearing the Word of God (see Rom 10:17). It is for this reason that Jesus Christ, the “One sent” from the Father to fulfill the Father’s saving plan, commissioned the Apostles as his emissaries: “go . . . and make disciples of all nations . . . teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you” (Mt 28:19-20). Through them and their successors, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, Jesus continues his

1 See also Second Vatican Council, *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (Gaudium et Spes)*, no. 22, in *Vatican Council II: Volume 1: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, new rev. ed., ed. Austin Flannery (Northport, NY: Costello Publishing 1996). (All subsequent citations from the conciliar documents are taken from this edition.)

saving mission in time until the end of the world. The missionary mandate of Jesus concerns not only the unique apostolic ministry but also the Church's fundamental mission to make disciples of all the nations.

The essence of the Church's mission, then, is the evangelization of all peoples. The entire Church and those who exercise apostolic ministry within the community of the Church are to make known the saving Truth, God's Word that Jesus came to reveal in his person and mission. The proclamation and transmission of the saving Word of God takes place through the Church's mission of evangelization. From the early history of the Church, the name given to the total process of making disciples and imparting the teaching of God's Word has been "catechesis" (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* [CCC], 2nd ed. [Washington, DC: Libreria Editrice Vaticana-USCCB, 2000], nos. 4-5). "Evangelization and catechesis are among the principal means by which the Church hands on the faith" (USCCB, *National Directory for Catechesis* [NDC] [Washington, DC: USCCB, 2005], § 15). In both evangelization and catechesis, Divine Revelation, God's self-communication in history that culminates in Jesus Christ, has a primary place. In essence, Divine Revelation is the Truth that God has taught us. "The source of catechesis is found in the word of God revealed by Jesus Christ" (NDC, § 18). At the basis of God's teaching one can discern a process or "divine pedagogy." An examination of the nature of God's self-revelation makes this process evident. Thus, ultimately, the passing-on of God's teaching in evangelization and catechesis should correspond to God's own pedagogy in his self-revelation.

Revelation: God's Self-Communication in Time and History

A. The Nature of Divine Revelation

The teaching of the Church has always affirmed that God reveals himself in created reality and

that human beings are capable by their nature of arriving at the certainty of God's existence. "God, who creates and conserves all things by his Word, provides men with constant evidence of himself in created realities" (Second Vatican Council, *Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation* [*Dei Verbum*] [DV], no. 3; see also Wis 13:1ff.; Rom 1:19-20). But although creation does bear witness to a personal and benevolent God, it does so in an impersonal manner. It offers knowledge of God, but it is incapable of providing a full knowledge of who God is. In his providential plan God desired to reveal himself fully to us so that we could attain personal communion with him. This divine personal disclosure and call to divine communion happened in time and human history. It began with the creation of the first humans, unfolded in the history of Israel, and reached completion in the Person and mission of Jesus Christ (see Eph 1:3-14). As the *Catechism* observes, the plan of Revelation "involves a specific divine pedagogy: God communicates himself to man gradually. He prepares him to welcome by stages the supernatural Revelation that is to culminate in the person and mission of the incarnate Word, Jesus Christ" (CCC, no. 53). God's self-revelation happens in the events of human history and in the inspired words that both accompany and interpret these events. Revelation then unfolds in history through "deeds and words, which are intrinsically bound up with each other. . . . the works performed by God in the history of salvation show forth and bear out the doctrine and realities signified by the words; the words, for their part, proclaim the works, and bring to light the mystery they contain" (DV, no. 2).

God's Revelation through deeds and words happened in stages, preparing human beings for his full self-disclosure in Jesus Christ. These stages began with God's Revelation to the first humans (Gn 1-3); continued in the history of Israel through the covenants with Noah, Abraham, Moses, and King David; and progressed in the teaching of the judges, priests, prophets, and biblical writers until the fulfillment of God's

Revelation and covenantal promises in Jesus Christ, the Incarnate Son. Because of the provisional nature of the various stages of Revelation in the divine pedagogy, their enduring elements are able to be discerned only in light of the fullness of Revelation in Christ. Thus, in the unfolding of Revelation, God the divine teacher continued to draw human beings to a more profound comprehension of his divine plan. In this process God at later stages often had to correct misunderstandings that had arisen at earlier stages due to human pride and sinfulness (see Mk 10:1-11; also see Aidan Nichols, *Lovely Like Jerusalem* [San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2007], 37, 85-86, 116-119). The process of Revelation involves written witness (the Books of the Old and New Testaments) and communal tradition (Israel and the Church). In Jesus—God and man, the perfect mediator of Revelation—God’s self-disclosure to humankind reaches its fullness. This means that the Revelation in all the other stages of God’s pedagogy must be interpreted and understood in light of the fullness of Revelation in Christ. “If the Son becomes incarnate in order to reveal, we must expect that all the resources of human nature will be used by Him to serve as the expression of His Person, the Son of God” (René Latourelle, *The Theology of Revelation* [New York: Alba House, 1987], 363). Jesus’ total human existence—his presence and self-manifestation, his deeds and words, his signs and miracles, and above all his Passion, Death, Resurrection, and Sending of the Holy Spirit—together these things definitively reveal God as a communion of persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. In Jesus Christ and the sending of the Holy Spirit, the Father’s Revelation is “completed and perfected,” and no new public Revelation will be given until Christ returns at the end of time (see DV, nos. 2, 4). Catechesis, which has as its source this definitive deposit of Revelation completed and perfected in Jesus Christ, must therefore attend to the means that God employs to transmit this deposit in history.

B. The Transmission of Divine Revelation

The Holy Spirit continues to guide the transmission of the definitive deposit of Divine Revelation given in Christ, through the Sacred Tradition coming from the Apostles and the Sacred Scriptures of both Testaments under the authoritative interpretation of the Magisterium of the Church. Catechesis must turn to these means of transmission in order to access its source, the deposit of Revelation. The forty-six books of the Old Testament and the twenty-seven books of the New Testament were written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit and constitute the written expression of the revealed Word of God. Because of Divine Inspiration, these books “firmly, faithfully and without error . . . teach that truth which God, for the sake of our salvation, wished to see confided to the sacred Scriptures” (DV, no. 11).

The books of the Old Testament provide us with the written expression of the provisional stages of God’s self-revelation, which culminates in the person and mission of Jesus Christ. “For the Christian, the Old Testament represents, in its totality, an advance towards Christ; only when it attains to him does its real meaning, which was gradually hinted at, become clear” (Joseph Ratzinger, *In the Beginning: A Catholic Understanding of the Story of Creation and the Fall* [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995], 9). The books of the New Testament are the written expression of the apostolic preaching and tradition; they transmit the words and deeds of Jesus that bring God’s self-revelation to completion.

The sacred books of both Testaments and the living Tradition of the Church, “flowing out from the same divine well-spring, come together in some fashion to form one thing” (DV, no. 9), the one deposit of God’s Revelation. Both Sacred Scripture and the living Tradition of the Church, with its roots in the Apostles and their teaching, are bound together, and it is from both that the Church draws her certainty about all the truths that God has revealed. The Tradition

of the Church encompasses the “doctrine, life and worship” by which the Church “perpetuates and transmits to every generation all that she herself is, all that she believes” (DV, no. 8). Sacred Scripture and Tradition together form the one deposit of Revelation that is entrusted to the Church by the Apostles under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Within the community of the Church, it is the Magisterium of the Church’s pastors—the pope and bishops as successors of the Apostles—that is entrusted with the authoritative interpretation of the deposit of Revelation (DV, no. 10). Sacred Scripture, Tradition, and the Magisterium form an interdependent unit whose parts work together under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit: “in the supremely wise arrangement of God, sacred Tradition, sacred Scripture and the Magisterium of the Church are so connected and associated that one of them cannot stand without the others” (DV, no. 10).

In looking to the deposit of God’s Revelation, catechists must be aware of the historical character of that Revelation, which progressed in stages leading to its fullness in Jesus Christ. Catechists must also be aware that, while the final stage of Revelation has arrived with Jesus, the Church’s understanding of this full Revelation progresses in time under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. There is a continual penetration of the fullness of Revelation that develops and progresses (see Second Vatican Council, *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church [Lumen Gentium]*, no. 12; also see DV, no. 8). Catechists thus need to be mindful of the development of doctrine, which entails deeper insights into the deposit of Revelation and often results in new terminology and expression of doctrines. Any authentic development of doctrine must take place under the guidance of and with the approval of the Magisterium of the Church. The principle source for catechesis, in other words, is “the word of God, contained and transmitted in Sacred Scripture and Sacred Tradition and interpreted by the Magisterium” (NDC, § 18).

C. Catechesis and the Divine Pedagogy

“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 and more systematic knowledge of the person and message of our Lord Jesus Christ” (Pope John Paul II, *On Catechesis in Our Time [Catechesi Tradendae]* [CT] [Washington, DC: USCCB, 1979], no. 19). In achieving its objective, catechesis needs to attend not only to its principal source—God’s Word as interpreted by the Magisterium—but also to the divine pedagogy or methodology by which God has revealed himself to us in history (see CT, no. 58; NDC, chapter 4). Catechesis, while certainly employing the variety of methodologies used in the process of education in general, must also look to the pedagogy of God and see this as a model and source for the pedagogy of faith. God’s self-revelation as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, three Persons in one God, happened in time and history and, as a result, happened in a process that unfolded in stages that culminated in the person and mission of Jesus Christ. It is a pedagogy that is progressive in nature. Even with the final Revelation given in Christ, the Church continues to progress in her comprehension and penetration of the fullness of Revelation. Catechetical methodology must then reflect this progressive unfolding in its process of maturing and educating believers in the faith of the Church.

God’s Revelation happened in deeds and words that interpenetrate and interpret one another. This is especially true regarding the final Revelation that happened in Christ, the Incarnate Word and perfect mediator of Revelation. In the Incarnation God used “all human dimensions,” actions, gestures, and conduct—every aspect of human existence, both individual and communal—to communicate the mystery of his innermost existence (see Latourelle, *Theology of Revelation*, 359ff.).

Catechesis must then attend to the concrete realities of human existence and employ these realities as it seeks to impart a deeper understanding of faith in Christ. On the one hand, catechesis must employ a *deductive approach* that takes as its point of departure the documents of the faith and then sets forth the proclamation of the faith by applying it to specific human experiences (see NDC, § 28; Congregation for the Clergy, *General Directory for Catechesis* [GDC] [Washington, DC: USCCB, 1997], no. 151). On the other hand, coupled with the deductive approach, catechesis must employ an *inductive approach* that can be described as existential in nature (GDC, no. 151). This approach looks to the specific events of salvation history, liturgical acts, and facts in the life of the Church, but it also attends to the events of human life, seeking to understand the meaning of these human realities in light of Divine Revelation and the teachings of the faith. In the inductive approach, the concerns and questions, hopes and anxieties, of ordinary human experience are examined in light of an understanding of the truths of the faith that God has revealed (see NDC, § 28; see also René Latourelle, *Man and His Problems in the Light of Jesus Christ* [New York: Alba House, 1983]). Catechesis should aim not only to guide believers to a deeper understanding of their faith in Jesus Christ and the teachings of the Church, but also to interpret and illuminate human experience with the data of faith (see GDC, no. 153).

In its contribution to the process of evangelization that is central to the mission of the Church, catechesis has its source in the Word of God, revealed fully in Jesus Christ and guarded and interpreted by the Magisterium. As catechesis strives to make disciples of Jesus and to educate and instruct them in the teachings of the Church, it does so not only by attending to the various educational methodologies but above all by attending to the pedagogy of God, the pedagogy of the Incarnation: “from the beginning of time, God has adapted his message to earthly conditions so that we might be able to receive it. ‘This implies for the catechist the never end-

ing task of finding a language capable of communicating the word of God and the creed of the Church, which is its development, in the various circumstances of those who hear it” (NDC, § 28.B, quoting GDC, no. 146). It is necessary for catechesis to remember this implication because faith, the beginning of salvation and participation in the life of the Trinity, “comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes through the word of Christ” (Rom 10:17).

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