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Total Catechesis

Reclaiming a Dynamic Model from the New Testament

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A pastor, a principal, or a director of religious education looks for a few simple guidelines or directions to identify the heart of catechetical ministry. They would like a perspective for organizing programs, training and supervising teachers, and selecting textbooks. Unfortunately, they face a vast quantity of literature that makes it very difficult to identify the core of catechesis. Official documents, such as the apostolic exhortation *Catechesi tradendae*, the *General Directory for Catechesis* (1998), and the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, coupled with abundant secondary literature pose a formidable challenge even for the most diligent seeker.

One possibility is to envision the outcomes of "successful catechesis." What does it look like? In the sections that follow, we will consider commonly expected outcomes of catechesis, some elements of a "total catechesis" drawn from the *General Directory for Catechesis*, and the development of a model taken from the New Testament.

Commonly Expected Outcomes of Catechesis

Some commonly expected outcomes of catechesis are sheerly quantitative. When a pastor sends in his annual report to the diocese, ordinarily he is to note the number of children in the parish and how many are enrolled in the parish school or in religious education. One outcome, then, is achieving as high an enrollment of young people as possible in catechetical programs. *The Official Catholic Directory,* published annually by P. J. Kenedy & Sons, applies another quantitative criterion—the number of sacraments celebrated.

Parents who enroll their children have another outcome in mind or hope in their hearts. If they follow typical American patterns, they want religion to serve as a vehicle to communicate good values and discipline to their children.

Certainly, pastors, teachers, and many parents also have other expectations linked more directly with the content of catechesis. They would like to have young Catholics exposed to the whole range of Catholic teaching. They want young people to have information about religion on hand, so they can anchor their Catholic identity. In a more general way, they want catechesis to produce good Catholic Christians.

What about the students themselves? Do they have some expected outcomes as they engage in the process of religious education or catechesis? My impression is that even the more interested and invested students do not have a clear sense of their own expectations, probably because the outcome floats for those who teach them and organize their catechesis.

How can we achieve some clarity and arrive at a focus for understanding what is "successful catechesis"? An important section of the *General Directory for Catechesis* provides a handy synthesis of the fundamental tasks of catechesis, which we can then develop more fully in light of models provided by the New Testament.

The *General Directory for Catechesis,* Number 85

The title of number 85 already indicates the core of catechesis as envisioned by the *Directory*: "Fundamental tasks of catechesis: helping to know, to celebrate and to contemplate the mystery of Christ." Subsections of number 85 elaborate on this direction: (a) promoting knowledge of the faith, (b) liturgical education, (c) moral formation, (d) teaching to pray. In effect, the *Directory* links the fundamental tasks of catechesis with the four pillars, or major parts, of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*: (a) The Profession of Faith, (b) The Celebration of the Christian Mystery, (c) Life in Christ, (d) Christian Prayer. Attention to these fundamental tasks constitutes a total, or integral, catechesis: what the apostolic exhortation *Catechesi tradendae* refers to as "initiating the hearers into the fullness of Christian life" (18) and the foundation for "the process of continuing conversion" (*Directory*, 69) which is the life of Christian discipleship.

Although these official documents provide a core vision of the outcomes of catechesis, the overall effect of catechesis may have an abstract feel, something far removed from the human and vital interactions of the classroom or the parish. Can we focus and concretize this vision of outcomes? I believe that a return to New Testament sources can do this for us.

New Testament Words and Themes

Three Greek words from the New Testament and early history of the Church capture foundational dimensions of Christian life and experience. They are *kerygma,* or proclamation; *leitourgia,* or liturgy/worship; and *diakonia,* or service. What later church documents reference and what catechetical ministry currently serves finds its roots in the New Testament and, in a particular way, in the realities expressed in these three words.

Kerygma—Proclaiming Our Faith

When Mark describes the beginning of Jesus' Galilean ministry, he writes: "Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee proclaiming the good news of God: 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news' " (Mark 1:14–15). Mark says that Jesus was proclaiming, *kēryssōn*. Proclamation of the good news is the essential foundation for faith. Saint Paul says the same in his letter to the Romans: "And how are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim [*kēryssontos*] him?" (Romans 10:14).

"The New Testament tells us *that catechesis must focus on what we believe and what difference it makes."*

Effective catechesis proclaims the good news so that it can be accepted in faith. Of course, to accept faith is to accept Jesus Christ, Savior of the world. Once the *kerygma* or the basic proclamation is made, it retains its vitality. It is not something only for "beginners." Those who believe need to return regularly to the basic proclamation. Saint Paul, for example, returns to it with his beloved Corinthian community: "Now I would remind you, brothers and sisters, of the good news that I proclaimed to you, which you in turn received, in which also you stand . . ." (1 Corinthians 15:1). Then he proceeds to give a summary of the *kerygma*: "For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures . . ." (1 Corinthians 15:3–4).

Catechesis, if we follow the New Testament patterns, begins with the basic proclamation and keeps returning to it. In addition to believers revisiting the *kerygma*, the New Testament indicates that they are also engaged in receiving *didachē,* or teaching. This enables them to assimilate more deeply and integrate more fully the life-giving word they have received. The early Jerusalem community is described in Acts 2:42: "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching [*didachē*] and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers."

The teaching that develops the fuller sense of the basic proclamation also incorporates the behavioral or moral implications of living by faith. This form of teaching is *paraklesis,* or exhortation. This is what Paul does in 1 Corinthians 1:10: "Now I appeal [*parakalō*] to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you be in agreement and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose."

In brief, catechesis ought to take its starting point in the basic proclamation of the good news, the *kerygma,* return regularly to this center of faith, deepen it through teaching, or *didachē*, and develop its implications for living in the manner of *paraklesis,* or exhortation. The New Testament tells us that catechesis must focus on what we believe and what difference it makes.

Leitourgia—Celebrating Our Faith

Leitourgia is liturgy or worship. In the New Testament, faith in the good news, believing in Jesus Christ, leads to worship and sacramental participation in the mysteries that have been proclaimed and believed.

A very clear example of how believing leads to worship and sacramental participation is found in the Acts of the Apostles, chapter 2. That momentous chapter begins with the coming of the Holy Spirit. The center is Peter's speech at Pentecost, his proclamation of the *kerygma*. Luke describes the reaction and response of the listeners who come to believe Peter's proclamation of the good news: "Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and to the other apostles, 'Brothers, what should we do?' " (v. 37). Peter's response indicates the close and direct relationship between faith and sacramental/liturgical participation in the mysteries of faith: "Peter said to them, 'Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit' "(v. 38).

This formal participation in the sacraments leads to an entirely "worshipful" life marked by a contemplative, prayerful stance and a renewal of mind. That is what Paul says to the Romans: "I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world,

but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect" (Romans 12:1–2).

Diakonia—Living Our Faith

Diakonia, or service, is a central theme of the New Testament. Jesus describes the very purpose of his coming among us as *diakonia*, service that he defines not as doing favors but rather as the very gift of himself in self-sacrificing love. " 'For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many' " (Mark 10:45).

In the remarkable depiction of the last judgment in Matthew 25, Jesus identifies the criterion of judgment as compassionate service, whether one has served one of the "least ones." For in serving them with compassion, those under judgment have served the Lord: " 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me' " (Matthew 25:40).

The call to *diakonia* signals the practical consequence for living out the proclamation of the good news that has been believed and the holy mysteries in which believers have participated through the sacraments. *Diakonia* also describes the mission of the followers of Jesus in the world. Through their service they give witness in the world to Jesus and, in that way, become salt and light for the world (see Matthew 5:13–16).

A Synthesis: Two Disciples on the Road

Earlier we noted that the *General Directory for Catechesis* and the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* converge in identifying the core of catechesis: knowledge of faith, celebration of the Christian mystery, moral life in Christ, and prayer. These elements can also be synthesized in three words important to the early Church: *kerygma* (proclamation), *leitourgia* (worship), and *diakonia* (service).

Another synthesis of these elements appears in chapter 24 of the Gospel according to Luke, the story of the two disciples on the way to Emmaus (vv. 13–35). They grapple with the recent events concerning Jesus of Nazareth, which have occurred in Jerusalem. The stranger they encounter proclaims the central mystery of faith, the death and resurrection of the Lord, and then deepens their sense of that fundamental proclamation. They celebrate sacramentally what they have come to believe in the breaking of bread. They pray and reflectively assimilate what has happened to them. Finally, they return to the Jerusalem community to serve them by witnessing to their experience of the risen Jesus.

Compactly, densely, and yet somehow also very naturally, the story of the two disciples on the way to Emmaus contains the essential elements that are the gist of catechesis: the word proclaimed, broken open, celebrated in worship, prayerfully assimilated, and shared in mission and service.

As we try to appreciate both official church documents and secondary literature about catechesis, these New Testament perspectives may serve to give us some orientation and focus.

An American Postscript

What we have considered, precisely because it is rooted in the documents of the universal Church and the New Testament, has a certain timeless and universal validity. We know, however, that the actual time and place of catechesis has a great bearing on how it ought to proceed. As much as universal values need recognition and affirmation, so do the particular circumstances that shape efforts.

I would like to draw again from the New Testament and see in three words and a phrase a way of setting the context for challenges that face American educators in the faith today.

Koinonia—We Are in Communion

Koinonia is translated in various ways such as "fellowship," "community," "participation," or—and I believe most accurately—"communion." It is a central feature of the Christian life as presented in the Gospel according to John and the First Letter of John.

The Second Vatican Council underscored its importance at the beginning of chapter 2 of *The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church,* which is entitled "The People of God." There the Council affirms that God did not want to save us individually, one by one, but decided to form us as a people "who might acknowledge him and serve him in holiness" (9).

Religion in America as it has been studied (see Robert Bella et al., *Habits of the Heart,* and Wade Clarke Roof, *A Generation of Seekers*) is an individual, personal, and even private matter. For Catholic Christians this approach to religion fails to reflect the fullness of our understanding and commitments. So, in an American context, the gist of catechesis must include a countercultural orientation to the communal dimension of faith life.

En to Hodo—Getting to the Heart of the Matter

The phrase *en to hodo* means very simply "on the way" or sometimes "up the road." It is a very concrete descriptor of discipleship in the New Testament. People who are disciples of Jesus are walking with him on the road. This image gives a good sense of the progressive or processive dimension of discipleship that also belongs to the catechetical process. There is, however, something else that happens on the road that needs to be noted for catechesis.

"So, the process is not simply linear, *a kind of serial progression of education that is familiar to Americans. It is also a spiral movement. There is a constant return to the heart of the matter for the sake of fuller understanding and deeper appreciation."*

On the road—for example in Mark, the great gospel of discipleship—Jesus engages in repetition, returning regularly to instruct and encourage the disciples who seem to have a tenuous hold on the message. So, the process is not simply linear, a kind of serial progression of education that is familiar to Americans. It is also a spiral movement. There is a constant return to the heart of the matter for the sake of fuller understanding and deeper appreciation. This is also even more dramatically evident in the Gospel according to John. And, interestingly, it is the pattern of the liturgical year that continues to repeat and encircle the mysteries so that they are more fully embraced and lived.

Again, this poses something of a challenge to the more American inclination to deal with matters in a linear and thematic fashion, moving from one thing to the next. Still, tradition, both biblical and liturgical, gives us another context for catechesis that strives for continuous access and deeper assimilation of the mysteries proclaimed, celebrated, and lived.

Aletheia—The Truth That Transforms

The simple translation of *aletheia* is "truth." It is a frequent and important word in the Gospel according the John, where Jesus says of himself, " 'I am the way, and the truth, and the life' " (John 14:6).

In a contemporary American context, it is important to distinguish truth from information. The new economy, the latest technology, the concerns about privacy, and the content of much entertainment—all these have a focus in information or bits of data. It is easy to confuse information for truth. Truth in the biblical and faith sense is much different than information. *Aletheia* in John has to do with a relationship with Jesus who is "the truth" and who provides meaningful directions in life.

"Documents of the Church *and the witness of the New Testament give us a focused sense that the catechetical enterprise engages us totally and dynamically as people who believe, worship, live, and pray."*

Again, in an American context, catechesis which necessarily includes some sharing of information must have an ultimate orientation to life-giving, meaning-constructing, and relationship-building truth.

Conclusion

We began by wondering about "successful catechesis." Documents of the Church and the witness of the New Testament give us a focused sense that the catechetical enterprise engages us totally and dynamically as people who believe, worship, live, and pray.

Reflection Questions

1. In your parish/school, what does "successful catechesis" look like? How do you assess the effectiveness of your catechetical ministry?
2. How are the tasks of catechesis (*kerygma*/proclamation, *leitourgia*/liturgy-worship, and *diakonia*/service) present in your program? Does any one task receive more attention than the others? What steps are needed to develop these tasks more fully in your parish/school?
3. Moving from proclamation to worship and service, how are you helping children, teens, and adults answer the question, "What difference does this make in my life?" How are you connecting faith to everyday life and everyday life to our Catholic faith?
4. Based on the developmental need to return "again and again" to the message taught, what can your parish/school do to move away from a thematic approach to a more focused developmental, or "spiral," model?
5. What steps does your parish/school need to take to reclaim the dynamic model of "total catechesis" presented here? What obstacles are in the way of implementing "total catechesis"? Where do the seeds for "total catechesis" already exist in your parish/school?

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