

Catechetics: An Adventure in Discovering

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In the past few years, the attacks on catechetical texts and procedures have mounted. I think it is time to put into writing the rationale behind the new texts and methods. Formerly, all the Education Office could do was to apply band-aid answers to religious education problems. Now that new texts proliferate, now that more than 90% of our teachers are using them, we are in a position to plot clearly what all the "newness" is about. There is an Oriental proverb that says "When you give a man a fish, you give him strength to live for a day; but when you teach a man how to fish, you give him the ability to live for a lifetime." I think once parents and teachers understand the catechetical process, then the texts and methods will no longer be a conundrum, the lessons will make sense, and fears about orthodoxy will be laid to rest.

Recall the story of the two disciples on the road to Emmaus as told by St. Luke (24:13-25). These two disciples had followed Christ for years. They had hoped He would free their nation from Roman domination. Then on a Friday called good, they saw Him die. He was buried. On Sunday some women told them they had seen Him risen. But the disciples had not. So their hopes were still dashed to the ground. Thus on the first Easter Sunday, they were trudging home to pick up the pieces.

As they walked, a stranger appeared out of nowhere. He asked, "Why are you sad?" He listened with His heart as well as with His ears. The two sensed His empathy, so they opened up and told Him the whole story of the last three days.

When they were finished, He began to speak. "What little sense you have!" He said. "Did not the Messiah have to undergo all this so as to enter into His glory?" Beginning, then, with Moses and all the prophets, He interpreted every passage of Scripture which referred to Him. What had looked to them like the end, now began to loom up like a beginning. Their hearts were burning within them.

At their journey's end, they begged the stranger to stay with them. He did. "When He had seated Himself with them to eat, He took bread, pronounced the blessing, then broke the bread and began to distribute it to them. With that their eyes were opened . . ." He had been with them all along the road. He could have told them who He was right from the start. Instead, He let them discover Him. After their discovery, they hurried back to the apostles and themselves became apostles.

This Easter event illustrates beautifully the new catechetical process. If we analyze the event, we shall discover it is composed of four parts. First, there was the human experience: being with Christ for a few years and especially witnessing His death and burial. Then there was the Christian message: Christ teaching them from Scripture on the way to Emmaus. Next in the breaking of the bread came the discovery. Finally, the response in aligning themselves once more with the apostles.

In what way does this process differ from the old catechetical method? In the old teaching model the focus was on the teacher. She had all the knowledge and passed it on to the student who was supposed not to have it. The content was the presentation of truths. The process was the lecture. And the product was to gain an intellectual assent or rejection of the truths based on the authority of the teacher or the evidence of the facts presented.

But the transmission of knowledge does not confer learning on a student any more than a depositor makes a teller rich merely by handing over his money to him. Or to change the analogy, having food is not nourishing. One must eat and digest it.

To learn, one must possess, make his own, assimilate and digest the facts and truths transmitted. Therefore, the emphasis has shifted to a new teaching model, the present one employed in the new catechetical texts.

In the new process, the focus is the student

— his learning — not the teacher. The content of the teaching is not just the presentation of truths; it is more — the proclamation of the good news of salvation, presenting one person to another. And this calls for more than a mere intellectual assent; it is an invitation to change one's life. The product, therefore, is the transformation of the child. And the process is the fourfold one used by Christ Himself.

Thus the new catechetics takes a slice of life, human experience. Either it creates this by a film or has the child recall one, or experience one in the classroom. The teacher's role is that of enabler or facilitator; that is, the teacher helps the student probe this experience. In fact, most of a class, or even more than one class, may be spent on this single phase. The experience of the Emmaus disciples was a many-year one with Christ. For instance, in the seventh grade text of the *Come to the Father*, two entire classes are spent on probing the meaning of departure. "Kids" talk about moving, going camping, changes in their growth, in their thinking, in their feelings, in their choosing. All this is by way of preparation for the sacrament of baptism as a departure experience, a Christian exodus, a call by God to leave behind a former way of life and assume a new one.

After the experience is probed, the Christian message is proclaimed, often from Scripture or liturgy or dogma or witness. Christ on the way to Emmaus used Scripture; the seventh grade text uses the liturgy of baptism and the call of Abraham to illumine the human experience of departure.

After this, comes the discovery. The meaning and significance of the Christian message is discovered in the light of a human experience through the working of the Holy Spirit. Where before there was only a human experience and the Christian message, now there is a third element effected by the Holy Spirit—namely, a deeper religious insight and discovery. The Spirit alone illumines the mind (the discovery) and moves the will (the response). This is precisely what distinguishes catechetics from every other academic discipline.

In the West, prone as we are to categorize knowledge, we left no room for the Holy Spirit, who works where He wills and as He wills. Again and again and again, He breaks up structures that life might live. The new catechetical process puts the Holy Spirit at the heart of itself. Hence the process is often called charismatic. Without the Spirit, there can be no discovery. If there is no discovery, there is no learning. If no learning, no se-

spending—no change of life. That is why the witness of the Christian community, prayer, and Eucharistic celebrations are so very, very important—these open up the student to the workings of the Holy Spirit. The parent plants, the teacher waters, but only the Spirit gives the growth (1 Cor. 3:6).

Finally discovery calls for response. The response is not always visible. At first it is interior: a deepening of the faith—a truth becoming a value. To reaffirm and reinforce this value, it needs to be exteriorized, publicly proclaimed. That is why the new texts employ the liturgy of silence, song, drama, and celebration. If the other steps in the process are done well—if for instance, the human experience is sufficiently probed, the Christian message proclaimed in the background of this experience, and the discovery made—then the response will follow spontaneously, as the applause does a fine performance on stage. The response will explode as poetry does from vehement feelings.

Therefore, in the new catechetical process there are four elements: HUMAN EXPERIENCE - CHRISTIAN MESSAGE - DISCOVERING-RESPONDING. There are three actors: the student, the teacher, and the Holy Spirit.

To exemplify the process once more, let us recall the experience of the apostles themselves. For years, they walked with Christ. This was their human experience. During those years, Christ taught them. This was the Christian message. The experience and the message, by themselves, were not enough for the apostles. On the night Christ died, they all fled away. The disciples on the way to Emmaus were a picture of the disappointment they all felt. For them there was no interaction between their human experience and the message of Christ until they were made to discover the meaning of the message in that experience. This discovery happened when the Holy Spirit came upon them on Pentecost Sunday. On that Sunday the apostles realized for the first time that the Man with whom they had been involved was God all along; that they had been walking and talking and witnessing the words and deeds of God Himself. They could hardly believe it. They were drunk with ecstatic joy. Their response was to burst out of the upper room and proclaim the word.

By understanding this catechetical process, parents and teachers ought to see its relevancy. The new catechetics integrates life and religion. That is why life situations play so large a part in the new texts and methods. The experiences of life are given meaning through the message, illuminated by the Holy Spirit.



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