

# Embodiment and Integral Witness: Pope Francis' Early Teaching on Catechesis

As a bishop, Jorge Bergoglio communicated profound truth in a simple manner. In words as in deeds he embodied the goal of total identification: “My people are poor and I am one of them” was a plain fact that undergirded his episcopal ministry. As such he lived modestly and traveled extensively via public transport, so as to embody this ethos. There is a sense in which the future pontiff Pope speaks to the everyman, the men and women living lives of quiet desperation.

In his first encyclical, less than four months after his election to the papacy, Pope Francis noted that catechesis has historically been centered around four elements: the profession of faith, the celebration of the sacraments, the ten commandments, and prayer. Pope Francis refers to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (CCC), as “a fundamental aid,” insofar as it unifies and systematizes the whole corpus of truth so that the Church is able to “communicate the entire content of her faith: all that she herself is, and all that she believes.”<sup>1</sup> Francis, then, begins by referring back to this fundamental aid while implying that it is not exhaustive or finalizing. The CCC itself was conceived within and speaks of a faith tradition and worldview that cannot be considered normative. For this reason, pre-evangelization is necessary to frame what is evidently self-referential. This openness to transcendence, as the possibility of an immortal soul, is the first step in catechesis.

In *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis highlights a trajectory for catechesis, and lays down a challenge insofar as “many manuals and programmes have not yet taken sufficiently into account the need for a mystagogical renewal.”<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, in *Lumen Fidei*, Pope Francis has underscored the essential educational role that sacraments have for Catholics, insofar as they are capable of “engaging the entire person, body and spirit, interior life and relationships with others.”<sup>3</sup> Concerning the need to induct children into both a proper understanding of the liturgical signs and the corresponding revelation of God in the Scripture, mystagogical renewal has much to offer. Mystagogical renewal makes explicit in catechetical practice the interrelated nature of Scripture and liturgy, so that “to understand the Word of God, then, we need to appreciate and experience the essential meaning and value of the liturgical action.”<sup>4</sup> Reading *Lumen Fidei*, it is clear that for Pope Francis, the preferred approach to Catechesis is mystagogical renewal. This is because Catechesis is not reserved for one particular age group or the task of a single generation; rather the handing on of the deposit of faith is necessarily intergenerational and involves each member of the community.

Nearly six months into his pontificate, in September 2013, Francis addressed 1,600 catechists, in order to: “highlight concerns related to new evangelisation and Catechesis, and to identify essential guidelines for the future of catechist training.”<sup>5</sup> At the outset, the interrelation between Catechesis and the New Evangelization can be interpreted through the

call by Francis to live authentically by embodying the mercy and tenderness of Christ.<sup>6</sup> Missional-mindedness is a key tenet of his papacy: all his teachings and writings refer back to the goal of forming the laity to make disciples. When 100,000 catechists filled St Peter's for the concluding Mass, the Holy Father referred to faith in terms of succession, insofar as the good deposit is “something beautiful . . . the best legacy we can pass on.”<sup>7</sup> This immediately brought to mind the themes of memory and identity, which is personal experience that endures and bears fruit in another person at a future time. Pope Francis distinguished “being” from merely “doing” catechesis, as something that embraces our whole life, insofar as catechesis means leading people to encounter Christ by our words and our lives, by giving witness. In this schema, effective catechesis is contingent upon and limited by the embodiment, or incarnation, of the deposit of faith.

This high view of catechesis calls for consecration for a lifelong mission and ministry in separately bound up in their own moral formation. Pope Francis laments the state of affairs whereby the demands of modern life, such as the need for double income to support a family, has meant that the mantle has been taken up by retirees and those who can afford to teach in their spare time. This has been caused by both the perception of catechesis as conducted in the home and parish by senior members who are retired. This has led to a situation where the Church is reliant on an army of part-timers, who cannot — despite the good intentions — be trained effectively. Lack of investment in specialized catechists reflects the view that catechesis is not as valuable as others areas.

For example, some dioceses in the UK are now recruiting corporate-style CEOs to manage their resources. There are few, if any, full-time catechists. Problematically, there are clear cut expectations of priests, but not for catechists. It is clear that Francis is sympathetic to these challenges, and committed to diagnosing their root causes. In keeping with his integral view of mission, Francis sees in the divine love suffused through everyday life, the capability of the Church, through the New Evangelization, to witness to God in the world. In this view, Evangelization becomes “nothing less than a recommitment to God’s own pedagogy of love as mediated through the church’s ministries.”<sup>8</sup> By reframing Catechesis as a pedagogy of love, Francis frames the goal of Catechesis in terms of “Christ’s love and its expression in the church.” In this schema, a reconversion to divine love is the prerequisite for catechesis.<sup>9</sup>

Credibility is important, since “no one is transformed by ideas alone.”<sup>10</sup> This seeker sensitivity is not interchangeable with an attractional model, because “effective evangelization calls for embodied, credible witness.”<sup>11</sup> The need for catechists to be aflame with the divine love of Christ links to the notion that the “Church does not grow by proselytizing; she grows by attracting others.”<sup>12</sup> This attraction emanates from, and is most acutely apparent in personal integrity, which means consistency between personal conduct and teaching, so that “people should see the Gospel, read the Gospel, in our lives.”<sup>13</sup> Francis is clear: The integral witness of the catechist’s personal moral conduct is inseparable from the vocation, insofar as the dynamism for catechesis proceeds from, and necessarily returns to, the love of Christ. Catechesis, then, is first and foremost Christological.

In his address to catechists, Francis highlights the instruction of Christ to his followers to abide in his love. Francis delineates between a nominal “post holder” and the holistic approach needed, insofar as being a catechist is not a “title” but rather an “attitude.” Francis acknowledges that such an integrity is ordinarily beyond the catechist, who must find the requisite power and sustenance in the Eucharist. Furthermore, catechists are not to merely receive the real presence; rather, they are to embrace Christ in Eucharistic adoration: “You look at the tabernacle and you let yourselves be looked at . . . it is simple!” Eucharistic adoration is part of “being” a catechist, because it “warms the heart, igniting the fire of friendship with the Lord, making you feel that he truly sees you, that he is close to you and loves you.”<sup>14</sup>

The Holy Father is clear: The vitality for catechistic endeavors flows from the simple exhortation to abide with Christ, in the Holy Eucharist, for if the love of God “is not in our own hearts, then how can we, who are poor sinners, warm the heart of others?”<sup>15</sup> The constant need for the catechist to return to the source of their faith as the joy of their salvation is a key theme Francis communicates to catechists from the very beginning of his papacy.

Pope Francis, *Lumen Fidei* §46; Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation (*Dei Verbum*), §8. ↵

*Evangelii Gaudium* 2013a, §166. In Dr. Gerard O’Shea, “The Vision of Pope Francis for Catechetics,” *Catechetical Review* 1.1 (2018), 12–13. [review.catechetics.com/vision-pope-francis-Catechesis-0#](http://review.catechetics.com/vision-pope-francis-Catechesis-0#). ↵

*Lumen Fidei* §40. ↵

Benedict XVI, *Verbum Domini* (Vatican City: Liberia Editrice Vaticana, 2013), art. 52. In O’Shea, “Vision,” footnote 12. ↵

Lori Dahlhoff, “Insights from the International Conference on Catechesis and Year of Faith Day for Catechists Pilgrimage,” *Momentum* 45, 1 (Feb/Mar 2014), 44. ↵

Katharine Mahon, “Serving the New Evangelization: Opportunities and Challenges in Catechesis and Pastoral Ministry in the Vision of Pope Francis,” *Liturgy* 33:2 (April 2018), 20–27. ↵

Pilgrimage of Catechists, 2013. ↵

Cf. Timothy P. O’Malley, *Liturgy and the New Evangelization: Practicing the Art of Self-Giving Love* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2014), 1. ↵

Mahon, 21. ↵

Mahon, 23. ↵

Mahon, 23. ↵

In his address to pilgrims, Francis recalled the words of Benedict XVI. ↵

Pilgrimage of Catechists, 2013. ↵

International Congress on Catechesis, The Holy See, 27 Sept 2013. ↵

Pilgrimage of Catechists, 2013. ↵