

Proximity and authenticity: The expressive dimension of Pope Francis' Catechetical vision

In September 2016, Pope Francis merged the existing Pontifical Council for the Laity and the Pontifical Council for Family under a new directorate: The Dicastery for the Laity, Family and Life. The merger meant a renewed purpose, namely, the 'promotion of life, the apostolate of the lay faithful, the pastoral care of the family and its mission according to God's plan and for the safeguard and support of human life'. In the same address, The Holy Father went to great lengths to highlight the need to train the laity to be active participants in the Church's mission. Missionary discipleship necessarily entails adequate Catechesis: 'we need knowledge and truth, because without these we cannot stand firm, we cannot move forward.' For despite the best intentions, without a firm foundation, the laity cannot be expected fully engage with their calling as missionary disciples.

From abiding with Christ comes the ability to fulfil Francis' second imperative to the Catechists: namely the imitation of Christ that enables one to leave themselves behind and go out to encounter others, as part of a church that goes fourth "as a community of missionary disciples." Pope Francis paints a picture of Catechesis in the New Evangelization as an expression of, and response to, the universal vocation of holiness to which each member of the Church is called, irrespective of status as clergy or laity. Teaching is the work of both volunteer Catechists in parishes and religious education teachers in Catholic schools. Yet the Holy Father recognises that the quality and efficacy of Catechesis varies dramatically, in accordance with the ability of the teacher, and the system they operate within, and the support and training they receive.

While the technical nature of the task means a degree of formation is necessary, Catechesis is, however, the responsibility of all parents, insofar as the family has been called the Church in miniature. While all members of the Church are duty bound to transmit the teaching of faith and morals, and to prepare incoming members for the rites of initiation, all members have a personal responsibility to deepen their own faith. In this respect, Catechesis remains subservient to, and is geared towards a fuller participation in sacramental life. Catechesis is not merely an academic exercise, since it must "educate believers, beginning with children, to encounter Christ... [this] gives rise to the desire to know him better and thus to follow Him to become his disciples." For Pope Francis, then, Catechesis is foremost the task of enkindling the desire, sown as a seed during evangelisation, for friendship with God.

Finally, Francis reasons that the missional intent which encompasses openness to others is a hallmark of true life in Christ, insofar as increased unity with Christ leads the person out of

themselves. Francis spells out the role of the Catechist: to encounter: “constantly to go forth to others out of love, to bear witness to Jesus and to talk about Jesus, to proclaim Jesus.” The heart of a catechist always beats with this systolic and diastolic movement: union with Christ – encounter with others. The heart of the catechist receives the gift of the kerygma, and in turn offers it to others as a gift. And the catechist is right there, at the centre of this exchange of gifts. That is the nature itself of the kerygma: it is a gift that generates mission that compels us to go beyond ourselves.” Francis concludes his address: “Let us remain with Christ – abiding in Christ – and let us always try to be one with him. Let us follow him, let us imitate him in his movement of love, in his going forth to meet humanity. Let us go forth and open doors. Let us have the audacity to mark out new paths for proclaiming the Gospel.”

In taking his model from the ministry of Christ, for Pope Francis, healing and reconciliation prefigure, and are integral to, teaching and proclamation. Such an approach to ministry sees a sequence which begins with acceptance, care for their immediate needs, before a deeper engagement with their spiritual needs. To His Holiness, pastoral ministry begins at the point of need and, like the analogy of a patient-run rehabilitation centre, he is not idealistic: all who are well enough to care for others is obligated to do so.” By extension, rather than Catechists waiting for their training to be complete, or waiting for someone more qualified, must step into the breeches and play their part. While this does not undermine the message that Catechists should be specialised, it takes a high view of the grace that empowers the talent of the catechist to be multiplied to great effect.

Indeed, Pope Francis’ vision for The New Evangelization follows his pastoral teaching in three ways: firstly, “an integrated system of healing the wounded sinner; second, proclaiming the Good News; and third, teaching or explaining how to live as a follower of Christ.” Catechesis, then, to Francis is part of a healing process, that “needs nearness, proximity.” “Day after day, touched by his compassion, we also can become compassionate towards others.” While this approach does not, indeed cannot, impart the divine healing of deep wounds, it does, in the words of Katharine Mahon, “can give participants a glimpse of divine love.”

Three years after *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis made an address at Caritas Internationalis, where he explained that the moral formation in Catechesis should seek to highlight human frailty, insofar as it is important to acknowledging that we all make mistakes at some time or another. This focus on human frailty, in the context of his previous teaching on Catechesis; namely the need to be authentic witnesses, can only be read as a necessary corrective to the danger of holding the office of Catechist to an impossibly high standard. This admission functions as a reminder to the Catechist of their reliance upon the grace of God to perform their vocation. Furthermore, it is a reminder or the need to continually seek forgiveness and start anew with Our Lord.

Pope Francis reminds us that this forgiveness which we offer to each other is another aspect of humanity: it should become a part of our everyday life. “Through moral formation, we are called to extend our experience of God’s mercy towards us to others, whose actions beg for our mercy.” Furthermore, moral formation leads to authenticity, which is the mark of the

Christian believer. Pope Francis recognises the important role Saints play in Catechesis, since “one of the most efficacious ways of helping others to edify themselves through moral formation is by presenting role models and case studies.” Pope Francis, by his very nature, is attractive to a wide range of people groups and to people of all faiths and beliefs. An authentic believer, Pope Francis teachers, is a living icon.