

Nurturing the seed: Pope Francis' teaching on the formative nature of Catechesis

In 2015, a session of the Pontifical Council for Promoting New Evangelization was devoted to the relationship between evangelization and Catechesis.

Francis links the new evangelization to Catechesis insofar as both demand that we become “pure instruments of salvation for our brothers”, foremost as part of the reconciling mission of God.

Catechesis then, is the space where Christian life matures, by enabling one to experience the mercy of God.” The Catechesis should never forget that The Holy Spirit is “the protagonist of evangelization”, and the Catechist is merely a co-operator or conduit.

The partnership with the Holy Spirit empowers the Catechist to take a bold stance and calls for “courage, creativity an... unchartered [paths].”

The empowering presence of the Holy Spirit makes the Catechist a “component of the process of evangelization”, however Francis notes that he or she should guard against a shallow understanding that does not teach children to encounter Christ, which “gives rise to the desire to know him better and thus to follow Him to become his disciples.

The challenge for the new evangelization and for the Catechesis, therefore, is played out precisely on this fundamental point: how to encounter Jesus, where is the most consistent place to find him and to follow him?”

Although Francis presided over the pilgrimage, contributions were offered by Bishops and Theologians, all in keeping with the spirit of Catechesis as dynamic transmission empowered by a consistent witness.

Archbishop Octavio Ruiz Arenas called Catechesis “one of the oldest duties in the life of the Church” insofar as only a living school of faith leads to an encounter with Christ.

In the modern age where privacy is diminished, it is more important than ever that there is “a consistency between faith and life” of the Catechist. Meanwhile, Archbishop Rino Fisichella noted that the role of Catechesis is “to deepen, nourish, and make faith more mature.”

Prof. Fr. Robert Dodaro, dean of the Pontifical Lateran University in Rome, linked effective Catechesis to an understanding of the foundations of social communication, noting that Catechists “need to master the art of communication, especially their most cunning forms.”

While the initial proclamation of the Gospel is integral to Evangelism, this seed must be cultivated through Catechesis. Nevertheless, Catechesis must not move beyond or leave behind this first truth.

The kerygma sets the foundation for Catechesis, and Francis continues in the same vein as St Paul's exhortation to the Galatians, not to forsake what they first believed. While Catechumens can advance in knowledge and understanding, and cultivate the virtue of Holy Wisdom, they can only advance into, rather than beyond, the mystery of faith, in terms of increased reverence and devotion.

This is the context for the instruction: "On the lips of the catechist the first proclamation must ring out over and over: "Jesus Christ loves you; he gave his life to save you; and now he is living at your side every day to enlighten, strengthen and free you."

This instruction to return daily to the saving encounter with Christ, the source of the power that sustains both the Catechist and the Catechumen, is at the heart of Francis' teaching on Catechesis.

In Chapter 165, Francis continues on this theme and warns against the temptation to suppose that "in Catechesis the kerygma gives way to a more "solid" formation", insofar as there is "nothing is more solid, profound, secure, meaningful and wisdom-filled than that initial proclamation."

The implication for Catechesis, as a formal mode of Christian formation, is to seek to "enter more deeply into the kerygma, which is reflected in, and constantly illuminates, the work of Catechesis."

The initial explicit proclamation of faith must loom large in the mind of the Catechist, who must be ready to re-evangelize and drill the message repeatedly until the knowledge becomes second nature.

This links to St Clement of Alexandria who was a great advocate of the need to sequence Catechesis correctly.

This section will address Pope Francis' teaching concerning Catechesis in his 2013 apostolic exhortation *Evangeli Gaudium* "On the proclamation of the Gospel in today's world".

Specifically, he discusses the role and nature of Catechesis as distinct yet linked to Evangelism. In the exhortation, Pope Francis, urges a cohesive and inclusive evangelism, emphasizing the crucial role of the laity as 'missionary evangelists'.

Chapter 81 acknowledges several key limiting factors that undermine the success of Parish catechesis. Namely, the abdication of responsibility, whereby lay people are protective of their free time, insofar as "it has become very difficult today to find trained parish catechists willing to persevere in this work for some years."

In this single sentence, Francis identifies the key issues: not only is there a shortage of trained/qualified/competent Catechists, but those that are capable lack the willingness to persevere in their vocation long enough to yield lasting fruit.

Francis is at pains to remind us that the end crowns the works. Again this links back to the relative increase in the cost of living, so that both mother and father often need to work to support a family, and there is less scope to volunteer free time in the service of Catechesis.

Meanwhile, chapter 131 distinguishes between the proclamation of the word during mass, which is “not so much a time for meditation, and Catechesis as a dialogue between God and his people.” Furthermore, the pre-eminence of the homily is determined by its Eucharistic context, insofar as “it surpasses all forms of Catechesis.”

Clearly, the message is that Catechesis cannot be replaced by a weekly homily. To avoid stagnation, catechists must embrace the risk of failure in trying new methods: “I would prefer a thousand times over a bruised Church than an ill Church!”

In Chapter 168, Francis addresses his approach to moral formation in terms of Catechesis, which should be foremost attractive, insofar as there should be less emphasis on prohibitions and strict prescriptive rules, but more focus on the attraction and the “ideal of a life of wisdom, self-fulfillment, and enrichment.”

In this view, the dangers of immorality are best framed in light of the positive message of life in Christ. This links to modern-day emphasis on discourse analysis, where care is placed on controlling and framing the narrative.

All too commonly people are aware of what the Church is against, and so this renewed focus on the delights on offer is welcome. Francis is clear that catechumens should be acutely aware of what the

Church affirms and supports, such as family and fraternity, and its ecological concern. Catechists should not resort to fear and be “dour judges bent on rooting out every threat and deviation,” but rather should be foremost “joyful messengers of challenging proposals, guardians of the goodness and beauty which shine forth in a life of fidelity to the Gospel.”

This links to the use of scripture in Catechesis, which is the focus of chapter 175, insofar as Catechists should unlock scripture and make it readily available and easily accessible. The revealed word can and does “radically enrich” Catechesis.

The ability of catechists to marshal scripture effectively is a requirement for effective Catechesis. This calls for “dioceses, parishes, and Catholic associations to provide for a serious, ongoing study of the Bible while encouraging its prayerful individual and communal reading.”

This is part of equipping the laity to proactively discern the will of God, rather than waiting for consultation with their clergy. Finally, Pope Francis refers to Scripture as a “sublime treasure... a storehouse of truth” and the laity must understand that “God has already spoken, and there is nothing further that we need to know, which has not been revealed to us.”

For this reason, Catechesis involves increasing Bible literacy, and it was no surprise then, that less than five years after *Evangelii Gaudium*, The Bishops Council in England and Wales instituted the Year of the Word.