

Proximity and authenticity: Pope Francis' relational teaching on Catechesis

During his pontificate, 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, Pope Francis 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 want of knowledge, my people perish, and despite the best intentions, without a firm foundation, the laity cannot be expected to fully engage with their calling as missionary disciples.

Obiorah notes that “many of them want to be involved in various aspects of the church’s mission, but attribute the lack of programs to the lack of interest by the clergy and consecrated persons”.

From abiding with Christ comes the ability to fulfill Francis’ second imperative to the Catechists: namely the imitation of Christ that enables one to leave themselves behind and go out to encounter others.

This links to the notion of a church that goes forth “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.

The quality and efficacy of Catechesis vary dramatically, in accordance with the ability of the teacher, 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 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 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 Francis, then, Catechesis is foremost the task of enkindling the desire, sown as a seed during evangelization, for friendship with God.

Finally, Francis reasons that the missional intent encompassing 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 center of this exchange of gifts.

That is the nature itself of the kerygma: it is a gift that generates a 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 Francis, healing and reconciliation prefigure, and are integral to, teaching and proclamation.

Such an approach to ministry sees a sequence that begins with acceptance, and care for their immediate needs, before a deeper engagement with their spiritual needs.

To Pope Francis, pastoral ministry begins at the point of need and, like the analogy of a patient-run rehabilitation center, he is not idealistic: all who are well enough to care for others are obligated to do so.”

By extension, rather than catechists waiting for their training to be complete, or waiting for someone more qualified, they must step into the breeches and play their part.

While this does not undermine the message that catechists should be specialized, it takes a high view of the grace that empowers the talent of the catechist to be multiplied to great effect.

Indeed, 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 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 acknowledge 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 catechists of their reliance upon the grace of God to perform their vocation.

Furthermore, it is a reminder of the need to continually seek forgiveness and start anew with Our Lord.

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 helps the individual to be authentic, which is the mark of the Christian believer.

Pope Francis recognizes 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 on a human level to people of all faiths and beliefs.

An authentic believer, Francis is a living icon. This is important because the lives of the saints play a very important role in Catechesis.