

The way of beauty: Pope Francis' and aesthetic dimension of Catechesis

In Chapter 158 of *Evangelii Gaudium*, Francis returns to the need for an attractional missiology, and specifically good communication, as a factor in the success of the aims and objectives of Catechesis.

The average reading age in the United Kingdom is nine years old, and as such effective communicators are taught to pitch their language to this level.

Paul VI noted that communication should, in terms of the weekly homily, be “simple, clear, direct, well-adapted”, and Francis is clear that the same principles can and must be applied to Catechesis.

Specifically, ‘simplicity’ refers to employing as universally comprehensible language as possible, as opposed to simplification of theological concepts.

This imperative links to Christ’s use of the parable as an example of adapting the story to the needs of the hearer, being particularly sensitive to context.

Yet from where does the driving force for such sensibility arise? It can only be from an incarnational approach, where the Catechesis embeds themselves in the lives of those they are seeking to catechize.

This echoes Francis’ exhortation to incarnational mission and witness, to be “shepherds with the odour of their sheep”, meaning to live and work in close proximity to those whom they serve, in order to understand, through sharing in, their unique paradigms, perspectives, and needs.” Catechesis, then, in this sense is explicitly linked to Evangelism.

In Chapter 166 of the same encyclical, Francis revisits mystagogical renewal, in terms of what he viewed as the recent phenomenon of mystagogic initiation within Catechesis, which refers to both “a progressive experience of formation a renewed appreciation of the liturgical signs of Christian initiation.”

Francis highlights the need for Catechetical training resources to accommodate the need for a mystagogical renewal, “one which would assume very different forms based on each educational community’s discernment.”

This again links to communication, and the need to be mindful of contextualization, as mentioned previously.

In the same chapter, Francis calls for a Catechesis that is sympathetic to the latest developments within the human sciences, in terms of articulating a cohesive approach to learning that takes from the latest research and breakthroughs in each respective field.

In this respect, Catechesis “demands a suitable environment and an attractive presentation, the use of eloquent symbols, inserted into a broader growth process and the integration of every dimension of the person within a communal journey of hearing and response.”

However, this renewed focus on how the liturgy and sacraments are presented should not mean turning the divine liturgy into a spectacle.

Dr Jem Sullivan, Professor of Catechetics, Dominican House of Studies, Washington: “The Church always discerns proper methods in light of the pedagogy of God. As St Augustine said: ‘A catechist is to cultivate delight in the mystery of faith first in themselves and then in the others.’”

When considering the implications of Pope Francis’s Missiology of Attraction for Catechesis, it is important to note that proclamation is a duty but also a natural expression, of people who wish to share and invite others to share in their joy.

Notably, it is not by proselytizing that the Church grows, but by attraction. This conviction is a hallmark of Francis’ life and ministry.

However, can and should the same approach be applied to Catechesis, which is more about training? Notably, the terms ‘attraction’ or ‘attractive’, in terms of the nature of “God’s mercy (EG 44) feature prominently in Francis’ writings.

In terms of Catechesis, Children need to be provided “with attractive testimonies that win them over by their sheer beauty.” Earlier in the same document, Francis sets out his vision of a ‘missionary option,’ that is, a transformative ‘missionary impulse’.

Bevan calls a “missiology of attraction.... Missiology with a message that attracts, a church that attracts, and a teaching that attracts.” In this vein, Catechists must bear witness to the “attractive nature of Christian truth and the lived joy of Christian discipleship by their very lives.” Effective Catechesis starts at home, and the Catechist is called to “labor as a servant of the New Evangelization.”

Pope Francis’ papacy has wrought both hope and challenge since the call to living witness necessitates investment in well-equipped catechists.

Chapter 167 of *Evangelii Gaudium* engages the postmodern preoccupation with emotive experience. Francis recommends that Catechesis ‘attends’ to the “way of beauty” (via pulchritudinis), insofar as presenting and modelling the Christian life as not merely mental affirmation, but rather “something beautiful, capable of filling life with new splendour and profound joy.”

In this schema, each and every expression of true beauty constitutes a path leading to an encounter with Christ, insofar as the Christian message is capable of reconciling within itself all other forms of ‘truths’.

This is the main contribution of St Clement of Alexandria, who specialized in taking pagan ‘truths’ and turning them inside out in the cause of the Christian message.

Furthermore, Via pulchritudinis links to the Charismatic renewal and modern music methods of engagement, and the use of arts.

However, Francis warns against ‘aesthetic relativism’, which threatens to “downplay the inseparable bond between truth, goodness, and beauty.”

Rather, the catechist should incorporate beauty as a gateway to the divine, capable of touching and causing the human heart to be turned towards the light of truth, “enabling the truth and goodness of the Risen Christ, the revelation of infinite beauty to radiate within it.”

Catechesis linked to, and influenced by, the via pulchritudinis means to embrace the Arts as a mode and tool of transmission.

Moreover, it means to “draw upon the wide variety of contemporary expressions so as to transmit the faith in a new language of parables.”

Problematically, it is easy to identify beauty in hindsight, since it stands the test of time, and seems to take on greater meaning.

In this vein, “we must be bold enough to discover new signs and new symbols, new flesh to embody and communicate the word, and different forms of beauty which are valued in different cultural settings yet prove particularly attractive for others.”

Beauty stems from aesthetic perception, which links to the dialogical encounter, which is the basis for Catechesis, and indeed salvation itself, with Christ foremost, then with his hands and feet.

O’shea acknowledges “modern young people are incredibly attentive to the visual image.” Students who cannot be reached by fine words can often be touched by beautiful images. For this reason, Pope Francis advises that “a formation in the via pulchritudinis ought to be part of our effort to pass on the faith.”