

Rethinking Catechetical Ministries: The “Future Work” of 60 C.E.

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Introduction

Through this essay I offer a proposal for retelling the “story” of the modern catechetical movement in Catholicism (since the Second Vatican Council). Specifically I focus on three aspects that have contributed to better practice as well to a general direction that can enrich pastoral ministry in Catholicism. The three aspects that are recapitulated and analyzed in the retelling of the catechetical story of recent decades are: First, the re-appropriation by Catholics of the world beneath the term **catechesis**. The mining of the meaning of catechesis gives rise to a “culture” that deserves reconsideration. Second, the re-thinking of the notion of **faith**, which accompanies the language of catechesis and the culture that it assumes, has exercised great influence on Catholic parish life. Third, an expanded definition of **ministry** -- as a way of sharing and experiencing a Catholic faith life available to all church members -- has expanded the horizon of Catholic life. In the final section of this essay, these three aspects of the contemporary Catholic story are brought into dialogue with the story of the church in the year 60 C.E., in order to offer a reflection and comparison between eras and movements, and to illumine the present situation in light of histories both recent and ancient.

1. Rethinking Catechesis as a Language and a Culture

If the modern catechetical movement in Roman Catholicism can be associated with any one event as expressive of its energy and force, that event is the Second Vatican Council. At that council, held in Rome in four sessions each autumn from 1962-65, the leaders of the Catholic church validated the principles of historical consciousness that leaders had regarded with suspicion just fifty years earlier. (McBrien, 49-50) Through their words and their example, the council’s leaders exhorted the church’s members to return to the sources of scripture and the early church’s traditions in order to effect spiritual renewal pastoral practice. This was seen in several aspects of the conciliar documents, aiming at internal renewal as well as external adaptation. The documents on the liturgy and on religious life did this in ways that captured many people’s attention. The restructured liturgy that drew people into more active participation using their native languages could hardly be missed by even the most casual observer. Even non-Catholics noticed the “changes” that occurred when women religious returned to the sources of their early founders’ intentions. Once they became clear on the historical context and originating intentions of their founders, many contemporary religious congregations made decisions to engage in new and different ministries, and to cease wearing the dress of another era in favor of following the founders’ intentions to be people of their own era. These moves

are but examples of the many more that coalesce around the idea of historical consciousness guiding a transposition of values and practices into a different key for the modern age. The “return to the sources” movement challenged scholars and practitioners to study afresh the original texts of the early tradition and, in a sense, to privilege that era as expressive of the core of Christian faith.

Adopting language to describe religious education that was derived from a decidedly different vocabulary, era and worldview, the bishops returned to the early sources of Christian tradition and employed terms such as *catechesis* and *Catechumenate*. These words initially sounded strange and quite new to Catholic ears, though the words were hardly inventions of the twentieth century. Associated with ancient practices in the early Christian churches, these words carried a world beneath them, revealing a language as well as a culture.

That Catholics adopted the language of catechesis was important for several reasons. In itself, it connoted a particular and startling understanding of the church’s processes of welcoming and forming members. The language of *catechism* and *instruction in the faith* were well known to Catholics before the council. In the imaginations of American Catholics and their instructors, the Baltimore Catechism loomed very large as the prototype for religious instruction. (Bryce, 78-98). The text helped to shape the Catholic imagination about the very task itself: the preparation of children for reception of sacraments, an activity carried out ideally in the Catholic schools. For those children who were not enrolled in Catholic schools, there were “after school” programs or “released time” instruction (here the released time was from public school classes). But the terms *catechesis* and *catechumenate* were not well known or widely used by most Catholics before the council.

Catechesis and its linguistic cousin, *Catechumenate*, recapitulated as well as promoted a different kind of thinking about the goal of forming members and the processes that would promote their growth. If language recapitulated that thinking, adoption of the *Catechumenate* as a process helped to promote it. Religious education personnel (eventually called catechists) adopted both the language and the culture catechesis in surprising, fresh and sometimes confusing ways. The language drew peoples’ imagination back to the era of the early Christians. In 1972, seven years after the close of the council, the Vatican published the renewed *Catechumenate* entitled *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults*. Both the process and the rituals associated with them echoed the lines of the ancient catechumenate practiced in the Jerusalem church under the direction of the Bishop St. Cyril (d. 386).

Careful study of the ancient *Catechumenate* by scholars in the first half of the twentieth century had revealed some clear patterns about religious education that, prior to the council, were not forefront in the minds or practices of its leaders. It is not overstatement to claim that these practices revealed a different “culture” of welcoming and forming its new members than the one known well by mid-twentieth century Catholic candidates (often called “converts” to Catholicism). Moreover, these practices presumed a different “culture” for the already initiated members who would welcome the new members. Some

important components of the ancient-yet-new catechumenal process and its cultural messages:

1. The Catechumenate was/is addressed primarily to adults
2. Whose decision to embrace Christianity was/is presumed to be free, responsible and at times, countercultural
3. With the candidates' gradual (in stages) integration into a community of sponsorship and welcome
4. In a communal, liturgical and ritual context

Many contemporary Catholic parishes have adopted the renewed Catechumenate since its post-conciliar establishment in 1972, and in the process of doing so, they have reshaped the culture of religious education in parish life. The result has been largely positive. The Catechumenate has promoted the involvement of lay adults in many aspects of parish life and in specific roles of service, including but not limited to welcoming the new members in sponsorship, integrating the rites of initiation into the larger liturgical life of the parish, and affirming the need for ongoing catechesis for adults beyond their initiation. In this sense a culture of catechesis has been born, attentive to the lifelong nature of faith formation and the need to address the concerns of adults of varied stages of faith, life circumstances and levels of readiness in the spiritual life. When the Vatican published the *General Directory for Catechesis* (in 1997), it made the claim that elements of the Catechumenate function as the inspiration for post-baptismal catechesis of persons of various ages, situations and stages of spiritual development. (*GDC*, 91) The Catholic Bishops of the United States consistently affirmed the importance of adult faith formation beyond the catechumenate; their statement entitled *Our Hearts Were Burning Within Us* aids parishes in designing and executing a plan that places adult formation at the heart and center of parish life. (1999)

2. Rethinking “Faith” in Both Aspects of the Tradition

Catholic theology has traditionally distinguished between two aspects of faith, the faith by which one believes (*fides qua creditur*) and the object or content of that faith (*fides quae creditur*). (Marthaler, 1993, 18-24) The language and culture of catechesis holds both meanings for *faith* within its grasp. But it is clear that the catechetical practitioners and leaders in the years following the council found in the catechetical language and catechumenal culture a renewed emphasis on the relational aspects of faith. In the minds of many this provided a long-needed balance to the emphasis on religious instruction, that is, acquiring the cognitive aspects of faith (the doctrine one knows and believes) as the touchstone of identity. This may be the logical result of the general trajectory of the council.

As previously noted, the groundwork for much of the council began in the early twentieth century, as Catholic theologians returned to the sources of the Christian tradition with renewed interest in the bible and the pastoral practices of the patristic era.

But there were some decisions that lacked precedent in any previous era. An illustration of the shift can be found in the conciliar deliberations concerning catechesis. Some people thought that the council would take up the unfinished work of Vatican I: the composition of a universal small catechism for children. In 1870 that council had ratified the idea (in its document *De parvo catechismo*), but neither the Vatican nor the bishops of the world acted on their plan to write one.

Instead of commissioning a catechism for the universal church, the leaders at Vatican II commissioned a catechetical directory, a new genre for Catholics without precedent for the international church. Referring to the work already done by the national church leadership in France and Italy, Bishop Lacointe of Beauvais, France advocated the writing of a directory. Lacointe and others imagined a foundational document that would describe the pastoral situation of each national church, the circumstances and characteristics of the learners of all ages, and enunciate the catechetical goals and tasks necessary for this ministry, as well as the human and material resources needed to carry it out. The context for catechesis and catechetical directories at the council could be found in the document that addressed the pastoral office of bishops.

Christus Dominus, the conciliar document on the Pastoral Office of Bishops, also furnished the council's official statement established the place of the bishop in overseeing the ministry of catechesis. It gave to bishops' conferences in the various nations the task of preparing "catechetical directories" for the respective nations, modeled on a directory that they did not write at the council, but rather commissioned for the worldwide church. The *General Catechetical Directory*, the international directory published in 1971 as a result of the council's deliberations, called catechesis a ministry of the Word, locating it in the context of the document on Divine Revelation of Vatican II (*Dei Verbum*). *Dei Verbum* employed a "personalist" view of God's revelation to the human being through the church's scripture and tradition. (Marthaler, 1973) God reveals to persons and through the person of Jesus Christ. As a free response to revelation, then, faith brings humans into relationship with God through Christ in the Spirit. We become disciples of Jesus not simply by knowing *about* Jesus and his message. Disciples know Jesus relationally and intimately, in prayer and community and through works of justice that proclaim God's reign. This relationship does not obviate the cognitive content of revelation, the person of Jesus Christ and the central beliefs of the church, but it does contextualize that content within the framework of relational faith. Richard Reichert summarized what he viewed as a paradigm shift in thinking about faith and its link with discipleship, an outcome of the emphasis on biblical faith:

In terms of catechesis we can identify the essential nature of that shift in this way. Prior to the council the goal of catechists was to help children become loyal, obedient, and conscientious members of the institutional church by providing them with a solid education in the truths of the faith. The council, on the other hand, initiated a shift toward understanding the goal of catechesis as one of forming disciples of Jesus who would be both willing and capable of participating in a community committed to proclaiming and promoting the reign of God in today's society. (Reichert, 3)

Reichert notes that the catechetical paradigm also carries assumptions about the church and the centrifugal force toward the world.

It [the post-conciliar catechetical paradigm] calls for understanding the church not so much as an institution (although it does of course have an institutional dimension) but as a community of disciples. It therefore calls upon us to move from the goal of educating children to be good members of an institution to the goal of forming all the baptized into disciples of Jesus. (Reichert, 4)

3. Rethinking the Flourishing of Ministries

The use of the term “ministry” to describe the activity of lay persons is relatively recent in the life of Catholicism, and the flowering of various ministries since the council has been nothing short of remarkable. Neither the leaders at Vatican II nor Catholics at large could have anticipated the development of ministries since the close of the council. This development is due, in part, to the trajectory set up at the council on catechesis as a ministry of the word, a ministry in which lay people exercise committed and sustained leadership.

Because catechesis was presented and understood as a pastoral ministry of the word, it functioned as the first model on which to build Catholics’ understanding of lay pastoral ministry. In describing catechetical activity as a ministry, the *General Catechetical Directory* elevated the service of the many volunteer lay people (as well as non-ordained religious women and men) to a new level of expression for Catholics. In the trajectory of Vatican II, the *General Catechetical Directory* offers this description of catechesis as part of the whole project of pastoral renewal of the church:

Renewal in the ministry of the word, especially in catechesis, can in no way be separated from general pastoral renewal. (*GCD*, 9. See also *GCD* 7, 11, 17)

In the years following the council many Catholic parishes in the United States employed full time directors of religious education/catechesis. Still it would have been impossible to predict the growth (and the speed of growth) in lay persons’ acceptance of general pastoral ministries in parish settings. In the early years following the council, these catechetical leaders, mostly women, were often the only full time non-ordained personnel on a parish church’s pastoral staff, and in this sense they offered a model for the exercise of pastoral ministry by lay people, a model that later expanded to include other ministries beside catechesis. (Davidson, 19-47)

The latest document on the topic of lay ministry by the Bishops of the United States aims to address the situation of *lay ecclesial ministers*. This term refers to the pastoral minister who serves as a parish catechetical leader, a liturgical minister or youth minister as well as a general pastoral minister who functions as a generalist in collaboration with the

pastor, or in some cases, as the leader of the community who has no resident priest. The person is authorized to serve, often by a commissioning or blessing by the bishop of the diocese.

It would be naïve to conclude that the flourishing of ministries occurred because of catechetical ministry without acknowledging the lack of male candidates for celibate priesthood as a major factor. The statistics compiled by CARA (Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate) on the issue are stark. Between 1965 (the year of the close of Vatican II) and 2006 the number of priests in the United States has declined from 58,000 to 42,000. The number of Catholics has risen from 45 million to 64 million during that same time period. CARA reports that the number of lay ministers is increasing, as is the number of parishes who employ them; by 1997 lay ministers were employed in two-thirds of the parishes in the United States. (Froehle and Gautier, 154)

Among the groups that have formed to support Catholic lay ministers is the National Association for Lay Ministry (NALM). The organization grew out of the concerns of lay people who wanted to promote education and fair working conditions for lay ministers. A small group began meeting in 1976 and formally established an organization in 1981 now based in Chicago, Illinois. According to the organization's mission statement, NALM commits its members to "support, educate and advocate for lay ministers" and to promote "the development of lay ministry in the Catholic Church." (www.nalm.org)

Conclusion: A Reflection on the 60's and The Future Work of Catechesis

In the previous section of this paper, I have argued that three aspects of the catechetical movement since Vatican II have been important for the life of the church at large. By offering a language and **a culture of welcome to adults**, the movement has enhanced the quality of the community life in parish congregations. By placing new emphasis on the **relational aspects of faith**, the catechetical movement has helped to enliven individuals and congregations. By its official recognition in the early years after Vatican II, **catechesis was understood to be a pastoral ministry**; that has furnished a precedent and example for the growing number of full time lay ministers in Catholic parishes.

In light of these three aspects I propose that catechetical leaders, theorists and practitioners re-think the 60's for their power to teach us. In referring to the 60's I do not mean only the 1960's, but rather the 60's C.E., three decades after the death of Jesus and the rise of a movement initially known as the Way. This period is well worth our reconsidering for the power of its story to inform our own.

The 60's C.E. were marked by the growth of the church in membership and in complexity. The 60's was a decade in which the letters of Paul were read, considered and shared among small communities; at this time the written Gospels were barely beginning to be codified and formalized. With the maturing of the Christian movement beyond the generation of disciples who knew the pre-Easter Jesus, there came new complexity. To "tell the story" and to celebrate it beyond Jewish categories in a multicultural Hellenistic

world replete with a variety of religions: this must have posed new questions among the believers. Drawing distinctions and connections between faith in its shared core, and the expression of faith in its cultured embodiments, surely challenged Christian individuals and communities then, as it does now. And clearly there were tensions.

The Pauline corpus contains numerous references to the tensions of communities, the most famous being Paul's conflict with the Judaizers. In that conflict we observe several flash points of debate. The tension between faith as relational trust (*fides qua creditur*) and faith as doctrinal/moral (*fides quae creditur*) was at the heart of the ancient debate. Did gentiles need to *know* certain content (about the Torah and prophets) in order to accept Jesus as Messiah? Did gentiles need to *do* certain behaviors (circumcision and dietary laws) in order to experience salvation? These are the foundational questions that drove the debate. The Judaizers emphasized knowing and doing as touchstones to faith. Paul had a different perspective.

But there were also issues of culture and authority embedded in the questions. Among them were the ecclesiological issues of the role of authority (Paul's or the Judaizers' or Peter's) in settling debate or promoting it, and the place of "reception" or acceptance of a teaching by the people and all community leaders. One could imagine that the deliberations at Jerusalem some years earlier did not dispel all past prejudices, ideas and ideologies concerning Gentile inclusion; in the aftermath and through the decade of the 60's C.E., we can imagine there was some resistance and nostalgia in the air. How did that affect ministry and the raising up of a new generation to serve the gospel community? These questions must have helped to shape the Christians in their identity and direction.

By all indicators, the current Catholic church in the United States will continue to grow in membership (currently 64 million). The complexity of church life will also continue to grow with the welcoming of new members from a variety of cultures.(Froehle and Gautier) Welcoming new members and energizing current ones, promoting faith as a genuine relationship, and raising (and raising up) lay leaders are three essential tasks that loom large. The story of the catechetical movement in these three aspects deserves retelling and translating for those who undertake these tasks in the future.

The retelling of the story in this essay accompanies a plea to rethink three interesting and beneficial aspects of the catechetical movement as enunciated since Vatican II. The plea is issued to Catholic pastoral leaders at a time when many are renewing attention to the cognitive dimensions of faith, especially as represented in catechisms, texts and programs aimed at "knowing the faith." Such efforts and programs may be necessary and helpful to adults and children, but they will be effective as *catechetical* efforts to the degree that they are contextualized in the catechetical paradigm. Otherwise, they will simply be instructional tools, but not faith-inspiring or faith-nurturing aspects of a communal life.

The three aspects thus considered are important now as they were in the 1960's, as well as the 60's C.E.. The genuine welcome of adults who want to embrace (or deepen) a

personal relationship with God in Christ and who recognize ministry as a baptismal responsibility: these features are needed in churches today as in the early church. Perhaps in the rethinking as well as the retelling, some new connections can be made to link our past with our future, and so enrich the practice of faith.

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Catechetical Documents of the Catholic Church:

GCD = *General catechetical directory (1971)* Washington, D.C.: United States Catholic Conference.

GDC = *General directory for catechesis (1997)* Washington D.C.: United States Catholic Conference.