The Important Role of Catechist

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The midpoint of the pastoral and academic year prompts us to look at the role of the catechist and recognize once again how significant this ministry is for the life of the Church Universal and the life of St. Peter Parish. We offer our gratitude to the good people who make possible the annual unfolding of the religious education programs in all the many formats within our parish community. In practical terms, the high regard our parish has for its catechists rests in no small part on the fact that without them a very important dimension of our parish’s ministry would be greatly diminished.

Catechists are recognized for the valuable and very practical teaching contribution they make to the life and mission of the Church. There is a deeply theological reason for our esteem and our appreciation. The actual day-to-day living out of this mission may appear to be routine because we are so familiar with it. Catechists share in one of the essential ministries of the Church – teaching the faith. Yet, seen in a larger context, the role of the catechist is much more than simply presenting course material, this parish ministry is a vital part of a great continuum of testimony that traces its origin and identity back to the very beginning and into the very heart of the Church.

In his encyclical letter Deus Caritas Est (God is Love) our Holy Father, Pope Benedict XVI, taught us that the “Church’s deepest nature is expressed in her threefold responsibility: of proclaiming the Word of God (kerygma-martyria), celebrating the sacraments (leitourgia), and exercising the ministry of charity (diakonia)” (25). The catechist, in the proclamation of the Word, is engaged in this work reflective of the Church’s “deepest nature.”

The catechist stands in the midst of the Church as one caught up in all of the particularity of his or her teaching situation. At the same time, he or she advances a twenty-century-long activity that mirrors and embodies the “Church’s deepest nature.”
Heralds of a Received Tradition

The starting point for these reflections on the important role of the catechist today as an integral part of the mission and ministry of the Church is the homily given by our Holy Father at the Mass he celebrated in the Archdiocese of Washington during his apostolic journey to the Church in the United States. The pope began by telling us, “In the exercise of my ministry as the successor of Peter, I have come to America to confirm you, my brothers and sisters, in the faith of the Apostles (cf. Luke 22:32). I have come to proclaim anew, as Peter proclaimed in the day of Pentecost, that Jesus Christ is Lord and Messiah, risen from the dead, seated in glory at the right hand of the Father and established as judge of the living and the dead” (cf. Acts 2:14ff). The Holy Father reminded us of our part in the Church’s mission to proclaim the good news and to do so in communion with the successor of Peter so that we are able to demonstrate our connectedness to the faith that comes to us from the Apostles.

It is the task of the Church to pass on from generation to generation the Gospel of Jesus Christ who came among us as our Lord and Savior. Each member of the Church participates in this mission and therefore bears a responsibility to share the faith. We do this out of a sense of our own identity as members of the Body of Christ with confidence because we can verify that what we proclaim is the faith that comes to us from the Apostles. We not only have a message to announce but we do so with assurance. We are heralds of a received tradition that offers the words of eternal life.

Grounded in the Good News

At the heart of the catechist’s identity and ministry as a member of the Church and one specifically designated or commissioned to participate in the Church’s teaching ministry is the message – the Good News. Each of us must be grounded in the Word of God as it is proclaimed in the Church. In this Word we find the meaning and focus of our life and the content and purpose of our teaching ministry. The Synod of Bishops’ meeting held in Rome had as its topic, “The Word of God in the Life and Mission of the Church.” The final outcome for this reflection by the Church universal echoes the understanding of the directive role that the Word of God has for the catechist.

God’s Word grounds the teaching of the faith and offers verification of a living continuity with the Lord. At the same time, it is clear that the Word of God is the content of our message. It is what we proclaim and why we take on this mission with zeal and confidence.

Christ continues to remain with us in His Church – His new Body – alive in the gift of His Holy Spirit. The Church is the guarantor that we can stay connected to the Gospel message, to the teaching of the Apostles and, therefore to Christ. We need to know our faith so that we can bear witness to it in our day and circumstances. Because of our fidelity to the faith as the Church has passed it on, we are capable of sharing in this ongoing apostolically-rooted tradition. Thus, we have the confidence of knowing that what we proclaim is true.

Catechetical ministry in all its forms can claim to participate in the perennial task that traces its origins to the tradition of the Apostles, just as it can claim that its message is that which comes to us from the Apostles. In this sense, the catechist is part of a great chain of living continuity that reaches back to the apostolic Church and reaches out to those today who
want to hear and be formed in that life-giving Word. It is easy to see why the Church places so much emphasis on the catechist.

**Storyteller of the Faith Family**

Those who teach in the name of the Church make an awesome claim. We claim to present the Words of everlasting life. On our own we simply do not have those words. We cannot even begin to understand who God is and what He wants to say to us. It is Christ who comes among us to reveal to us who God is – our Father– and, therefore, who we are. Jesus is the way, the truth and the life. We no longer have to rely on our words. We have His Word.

In Saint John’s Gospel we read, “Then many of His disciples who were listening said, ‘This saying is hard; who can accept it?’” Jesus said to them, “The words I have spoken to you are spirit and life.”...As a result of this, many of His disciples returned to their former way of life and no longer accompanied Him. Jesus then said to the Twelve, ‘Do you also want to leave?’ Simon Peter answered Him, ‘Master, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and are convinced that you are the Holy One of God’” (Jn 6:60, 63, 66-69). The catechist, through his or her words and deeds, bears witness to Jesus, tells the story of Jesus, lives the message of Jesus.

Teacher is an ancient and well-honored title. The teacher is the storyteller of the faith family. He or she passes on the collective memory of the community, the deposit of faith, so that each generation can benefit from the living faith of the past generations.

We begin to share when we tell others of Jesus. We live and talk in such a manner that the truth of what we proclaim inspires others to accept and follow the Lord. This is the primary role of the catechist – to tell the story of Jesus with such conviction and with such witness that others want to follow Him. Faith is awakened and nurtured with this witness.

**Witness to Faith**

This proclamation of the Kingdom of God is more than personal enthusiasm. It is anchored in the knowledge that Christ has died and that Christ has risen. Hence, the Creed, which is the summary of our faith. Witness to the faith necessarily involves content. The creed is the summary of who Jesus is and what He does. It is the framework for the passing on of the story.

Tradition, Scripture and the living *Magisterium*, with the presence of the Spirit guiding the faithful to be open to the truth are all gifts of God. As the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* recalls for us, Sacred Scripture, Tradition and the *Magisterium* of all the Church, in accord with God’s wise design, are so linked that each in its own way under the action of the Holy Spirit contributes effectively to the salvation of souls (95).

Authentic Catholic faith is never partial or selective. It is always universal. We say yes to the whole mystery of the faith and to each of its elements because of our personal faith in God. We believe the truth that God reveals because we believe God, and we believe that God is still teaching in and through the church. “You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and are convinced that you are the Holy One of God” (Jn 6:68-69).
Leaven in the Culture

The teaching of the faith – the work of the catechist – takes place in a specific context. For us it is our culture, our society. In his talk to the bishops of the United States, at the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception, the Holy Father reminded them that we live in a land of strong faith where religious freedom is practiced and protected: “America is also a land of great faith. Your people are remarkable for their religious fervor, and they take pride in belonging to a worshipping community. They have confidence in God, and they do not hesitate to bring moral arguments rooted in biblical faith into their public discourse.” It is within this context that the pope tells us that our knowledge of the faith is important so that we can truly be a ‘leaven’ in society.

We teach, but we teach with a purpose. The goal is transformation not only of the individual but of our whole culture. The catechist can be “leaven” by bringing to those being formed in the faith an awareness of their own potential to change the world in which we live and make it more truly a reflection – a manifestation – of God’s Kingdom among us. It is not an exaggeration to envision achieving a world of truth, justice, compassion, understanding, peace and love. The catechist helps to fashion another generation of those who can move forward the goal – to manifest the Kingdom.

A Blessing for St. Peter Parish

For St. Peter Parish, catechists are a blessing for so many reasons. They embody one aspect of our parish’s responsibility to teach the faith. They do so in an orderly and systematic manner. They also do so under the direction and the guidance of the priest, thus assuring their connectedness with the teaching of the Church – their part in the apostolic mission to ensure that the faith of the Apostles is proclaimed and lived among us today.

It is not only encouraging but edifying to think that each of the catechists and all those involved in the parish catechetical endeavor are part of a far larger ecclesial action than is immediately evident in the classrooms and settings where they help form the next generation of Catholics. When we speak of the esteemed role of the catechist, we necessarily reflect the far larger picture of how each individual is personally identified with the ongoing effort of the whole Church to make Christ known so that He is embraced and becomes the source of new life.

Proclaiming with Confidence

In assessing the catechetical enterprise today, we can do so with confidence. There will always be challenges, and even difficulties, associated with passing on the faith. What marks the current moment is a deepening awareness of both the importance of what we have to say – the message – and the willingness of so many – faithful and informed catechists – to pass on the message.

Catechists courageously and lovingly proclaim the message of Jesus. This the Church has always done with confidence and assurance because we know that even in the face of difficulty or indifference we can joyfully, confidently and lovingly articulate and share the words that give life. Looking to the future of catechesis, we should do so with hope, confidence and enthusiasm knowing that we bring something to those we teach that no one else can. We share the story of Jesus.