



Meeting Christ in Catechesis: It's not in the textbook!

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Artwork by Mark Hakomaki

Every week, year in and year out, we parish directors and volunteer catechists sit down with our small classes of children or adults, regardless the age we teach, and try to pass on to them some of the Catholic Faith that we love so much. It happens all across the Church. Sunday mornings or Wednesday evenings, or sometimes both. It's a great and wonderful ministry - the ministry of catechesis.

Most of us use a textbook from a major publishing house. The titles all suggest the importance of the ministry we share: *Call to Faith*, *Faith and Life*, *Faith First*, *We Believe*, *Blest Are We*, *Finding God*, *Christ Jesus the Way*, *Christ Our Life*. The lessons in these texts are a solid way for us to present what our bishops have asked us to: a full and complete treatment of the faith in every grade level. We're more than happy to do it.

But here's a little test. In order for a child or an adult to grow in faith from the catechesis we provide, what must be present in that child's or adult's heart *first*?

The General Directory for Catechesis (GDC), our guide in this ministry, gives us a clear answer. And what must be present first cannot be found in any of those textbooks, as important as they are to our ministry.

What's missing, the GDC tells us, is *conversion to Jesus Christ*. Conversion precedes catechesis. And conversion is often not part of what we all do.

Oh, yes, we talk about Christ in our classes, and pray in our prayer corners, and try to help our students understand how Christ is in the Church. But knowing *about* Christ and actually *meeting* Christ are two very different things, according to the GDC.

Conversion to Christ *precedes* catechesis. And once experienced, it's conversion that leads a person to undertake his or her journey of faith, not facts or knowledge about Catholicism - which is mainly what the textbooks provide. A person who has not yet really met Jesus Christ and decided to follow Christ, can sit in a classroom and study religion, but until there is conversion, that person won't be a dedicated follower of Christ.

In 1964, Father Ray Lucker (later Bishop Lucker, the Diocese of New Ulm, Minnesota) co-wrote an essay with Theodore Stone in which they expressed strong belief in what was emerging as the new catechesis.

[The historical development in catechesis] might give the impression that first comes instruction, then formation, and finally the personal meeting between God and the student. The reverse however is more correct. Communion with God ordinarily does not take place at the end of the religion lesson, but rather whenever God approaches through sacred signs (biblical, liturgical, witness, or doctrinal signs)...to transform one's mentality.

("Formation and Training of Lay Catechists" in *Pastoral Catechetics*. New York: Herder and Herder, 1964, p 239. Quoted in chapter 2 of *Dreams and Visions: Pastoral Planning for Lifelong Faith Formation*. New London, CT: Twenty-Third Publications, 2007).

This just makes good common sense. You could study about Islam, for example. You could know the prophets, the scriptures, the prayers, and the people - but that wouldn't make you a Muslim, would it? You could explore Judaism - it's history and liturgies and leaders - but that would not make you a Jew. So it is with us. Even if you know all about the Church and Christ, if you do not give your heart to Christ, you are not a Christian, except nominally.

One of the difficulties (recognized by the *General Directory*) in our present method of providing religious education is that so few of those in our catechesis programs have experienced this conversion. As a result, their hearts are often not in the program! But even more difficult, many of us - the catechists - also have not experienced this conversion! We might agree to teach 4th grade this year, for example, but we're not always in it with our whole hearts. Like the kids, we may even dread the weekly classes a little. But as article 142 of the *GDC* puts it:

...there cannot be teachers of the faith other than those who are convinced and faithful disciples of Christ and his Church.

Here's what else the *GDC* says about it. There's a strong message contained in this:

Many who present themselves for catechesis truly require genuine conversion. Because of this, the Church usually desires that the first stage in the catechetical process be dedicated to ensuring conversion...Only by starting with conversion... can catechesis, strictly speaking, fulfill its proper task... (The *GDC*, article 62)

Baptism is no guarantee. Unfortunately, baptism is no guarantee of conversion. For some, the faith begins with great vigor, but they lose heart after a while. For others, their faith was never deep - always on the surface of their lives until something better or more interesting came along. And for still others, perhaps many others, baptism was just not taken very seriously to begin with! Or they were baptized as an infant, but raised in a home where faith is not part of everyday life. Consequently, these have never come to know Jesus in their own lives.

Jesus spoke of faith like this in the Gospel. The writers of the *GDC* saw in this the seeds for everything they wrote about the renewal of catechesis in our day and age:

A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seed fell on the path, and the birds came and ate it up. Other seed fell on rocky ground, where it did not have much soil, and it sprang up quickly, since it had no depth of soil. And when the sun rose, it was scorched; and since it had no root, it withered away. Other seed fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked it, and it yielded no grain. Other seed fell into good soil and brought forth grain, growing up and increasing and yielding thirty and sixty and a hundredfold. Let anyone with ears to hear listen! (Mark 4:3-8, NRSV)

And here's the rub. Because the seed of faith is vulnerable to the changing soil of one's life (to borrow Jesus' metaphor a moment) the church must take great care to provide on-going opportunities for conversion, followed by effective catechesis to nourish faith and help it blossom.

It's these opportunities for conversion that we want to explore here for a moment.

Conversion, anyone? What is the best way to lead someone else to follow the Way of Christ? How do you help others experience lasting Christian conversion? How do you help *yourself* remain in a process of turning your own heart to Christ over and over again?

Placing learners in a classroom setting will not be enough in itself. One can use this setting to pass on the facts of the faith, or to help a learner know *about* the Bible, or *about* Christ. But to lead others to actually meet Christ, and be converted to follow the Way of Christ, requires more.

How does this sort of conversion happen? Well, the most profound way that we can help others is to provide opportunities for **faith sharing** within our

programs, and throughout our parishes. This is the bedrock, the very first step, in helping others come to experience Christ personally in their own lives.

The Catechumenate, in its wisdom, knows this instinctively, which is why everyone who comes into the Catechumenate is first invited to “break open the Word” in a group setting. It’s in those moments of **faith sharing**, of opening one’s heart, that little by little, each can turn to Christ. The renewal programs of the church, beyond the Catechumenate, also know this: TEC, Marriage Encounter, Cursillo, and all the others. During these retreats, it’s in the **faith sharing** done within the group that folks find themselves turning their hearts to Christ.

So it must be in our catechesis programs. Each and every time we gather, every single week, we should begin by creating the environment in which **faith sharing** is possible. It’s not difficult to lead. It can be done throughout the whole community. And it will change the spirit of your program in such a positive way that you’ll soon wonder how you ever lived without it! [For a full guide to doing this, including examples and handouts, see the material in *Dreams and Visions: Pastoral Planning for Lifelong Faith Formation* (New London, CT: Twenty-Third Publications. To obtain this resource, visit www.pastoralplanning.com.)

In the process of **faith sharing**, each person looks into the events and people of his or her life - and sees them anew as part of his or her faith. One then begins to see (slowly at first) that one must *die* to oneself in order to *rise* with happiness, and then *go forth* to love as a follower of Christ. Conversion of this sort is on-going throughout life: conversion moment followed by conversion moment. *Poco y poco*. Little by little. Over and over again.

This is how we bring the Paschal Mystery of Christ into our classrooms. We invite people to share about how, in their own everyday lives, they experience dying and rising. We invite them to share about how they sense a call to reach out to others in love and faith. In that sharing, Christ is found.

Once we have shared our faith this way, the sacraments start to make sense. We come to understand how we must die in Christ through baptism and reconciliation. We find within ourselves a profound desire for communion with Christ and our mates. We experience healing and peace. And we experience the same excitement that those first apostles must have felt as we go forth now, confirmed in the faith, eager to tell others the good news!

For Christ’s sake! All of this is done for Christ’s sake, not our own. It is Christ who acts within us when we *open* ourselves to the mystery of faith. The opening is the key. As we share, we become more open. We experience a turning of our

hearts, a conversion to Christ. And this is what *precedes* catechesis. In other words, only when one has truly met Christ like this, and allowed oneself to enter into Christ's death and resurrection, can one begin to understand one's faith. Only then does religious education make any sense to him or her.

In your Classroom

Try this. As everyone is getting settled, and in place of any other opening prayer, re-read part of the Gospel from the previous Sunday Assembly. Then invite each one in the room to share something from their past week that connects in some way to the teaching of Jesus in the Gospel. You can help them do that by posing a well-prepared question that leads them to see the Gospel in the context of their own lives. Join in this by sharing yourself, honestly and in plain words, about your own experiences.

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