



The FURROW

A JOURNAL FOR THE
CONTEMPORARY CHURCH

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Towards an Evangelising Catechesis: *Reflections on the new Directory for Catechesis*

December 2020

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In the midst of our experience of the Covid-19 pandemic the Pontifical Council for Promoting the New Evangelisation issued a new Directory for Catechesis.¹ At a first glance this is a very long document which will take some time to digest as we continue to move into what we are all calling the ‘new normal’ of Church life. What is interesting is that it very deliberately moves away from what we would call a classroom based approach towards catechesis and points towards an entirely new mindset which sees catechesis as an ‘essential part of the broader process of renewal’.² Throughout the whole document there is a strong emphasis on Pope Francis’ vision of a missionary Church in *Evangelii Gaudium* and the urgency of pastoral conversion, where there is no opposition between content and method, faith and life. Often in my work in the Diocese of Dublin I come across a kind of boxed-in thinking about catechesis which is attached to preparation for sacramental moments. Here I am going to reflect on major themes that are striking, and which set a *new* tone in describing the ministry of catechesis which might help us to think out of that box and into a new reality.

THE ROLE OF THE CATECHIST AS ACCOMPANIER

On first reading, the language of *accompaniment* is very noticeable, and is weaved into the document, like a constant thread. Here the catechist is described as ‘a traveling companion’, an expert in the art of accompaniment.³ This art involves a whole set of skill bases: the ability to listen well, exercising patience, sensitivity to how the Spirit often works gradually in people’s lives, being aware of

1 Pontifical Council for Promoting the New Evangelisation, *The Directory for Catechesis* (DC) 23rd March 2020

2 DC 1

3 DC 113c

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the joys and sorrows of the human journey and connecting them to the Gospel. All of this, of course, implies that this ministry is relational, it's about much more than giving classes. It is about walking with people where they are and journeying to a new place. The model for this accompaniment is Jesus the one who walks 'beside others in order to listen to them and explain the Scriptures, without establishing the route in advance, without demanding to see the fruits, and without holding back for himself.'⁴

This accompaniment *adapts* itself to different needs. So, for example, accompaniment for those who are setting out on the journey of faith will look different from accompaniment for those who are rediscovering their faith.⁵ Here there is also a strong emphasis on the formation of adults and the power of small groups where friendly relationships of support are built up, life experiences are exchanged and person to person witness takes place.⁶ In this focus on accompaniment there is also a strong move away from what has been called a catechism mentality, where catechesis concentrates on learning sections of the catechism and banking it up in the head. This document spells out the need to develop local resources that speak to and adapt to the mentality and age of the participants, integrating faith with life and fostering the journey of Christian formation.⁷

THE INTEGRATION OF EVANGELISATION AND CATECHESIS

Often when we speak of evangelisation, we tend to dismiss this as a moment that is dealt with, after all isn't everyone baptised! This then leads to a mindset that can take for granted that our relationship with Jesus is alive and that the sacraments feed that relationship. However, in the context of parish we are more and more aware that this is not the case, as increasing numbers of the baptised opt out.⁸ This document emphasises the importance of recognising the in-built connection between evangelisation and mission.⁹ Catechesis and evangelisation are always inter-connected, where this is less about the delivery of doctrine and more about inviting the curious to see why the Good News is so life giving.¹⁰

The restoration of the *catechumenate* maps out the dynamics

4 DC 135c

5 DC 264

6 DC 265, *Evangelii Gaudium* (EG) 127 – 128

7 DC 404

8 Cf. Kieran, P., and Mullally, A., *The new 'nones': the implications of ticking the 'No Religion' census box for educators in Ireland*, *The Furrow*, v. 71 (July/August) 2020: 387 - 395

9 DC 48

10 DC 29, 60

of coming to faith.¹¹ In countries where children are automatically baptised as part of the culture this dynamic is often short circuited. The catechumenate is supposed to be the model for an evangelising catechesis, where those who are supposedly catechised are invited to return to the source of the Christian way of life. I have often come across parish personnel who state that the catechumenate never really ‘took on’ in Ireland because everybody is already baptised! With this mindset there is also an underlying assumption that the Gospel has taken root and that there is a living relationship in place which nourishes faith. This can no longer be taken for granted. But if the catechumenate sets the pattern for coming to faith and continually deepening faith, then perhaps the time has come to embrace this dynamic more fully in pastoral practice. The characteristic features that would need to become more commonplace in our practice are: *communicating* the heart of faith in a relevant way, *embracing* the concept of a personal journey of response to God and *honouring* experiences that touch the whole person. This can be called an evangelising catechesis. Evangelising catechesis takes on board that the Christian way of life is one of constant renewal, ongoing conversion, and witness. Here the notion of conversion is fundamental.¹² It’s this dynamic that must be the driving force for parish catechetical practice, where there is a slow penetration of the Gospel into the depths of a person over a sustained period of time.¹³

THE IMPORTANCE OF ENCOUNTER AND EXPERIENCE

The directory makes a bold statement about the importance of *experience* stating that ‘only a catechesis that proceeds from religious information to accompaniment and to experience of God will be capable of offering meaning.’¹⁴ This turn to the experiential is very important for our time where people value that their experience counts for something and it is the space in which God speaks.¹⁵ The person who is accompanied and shares their experience expects to be approached with an attitude of love, acceptance and respect. It is the catechists’ role to be open to this experience and to facilitate a process which makes Gospel connections with experience of life.

This experience leads to an encounter with Christ, where heart, mind and senses are nourished.¹⁶ When the heart is touched then

11 DC 63

12 DC 66

13 DC 395

14 DC 371

15 DC 197

16 DC 75 (quoting *Catechesi Tradendae* 5)

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the person gradually comes to feel, think and act like Christ, this is the goal of all catechesis. With this focus on the experiential, catechesis must be practical, where experiences of different kinds of prayer take place, the habit of reflection on the God connections in life are built up and liturgical celebrations touch the senses. Jesus modelled this way of being with others in the way in which he formed his disciples by teaching them to pray, living together in a community and proposing his Gospel way of life.¹⁷

THE PLACE OF THE PARISH

While this document re-iterates the essential importance of the parish as a place where faith is nourished and supported,¹⁸ it also reaffirms that it is not meant to be an outdated institution but a flexible community of faith, open to what is new and really in touch with people's lives.¹⁹ There is a clear call here to examine what we are currently doing in terms of cultivating *new* approaches to building and growing faith.²⁰ Every parish is invited to be in dialogue with new realities and to explore new ways of reaching out. Here, in Dublin, this was exemplified in the creative reaching out that happened during the last few months in the ways that parishes suddenly became more digitally aware and reached out to the wider community through the world wide web, offering more than Mass.

The document identifies three aspects of a parish that has wakened up to the need for this new orientation of all its pastoral activity. The *first* aspect of this awakening is that the parish has shifted from thinking of itself as a sacramental service station and has begun to embrace the notion that it's a missionary presence, a group of convinced disciples who witness by the way they live. It's not a group of the perfect, or a bunch of experts, it's a gathering of humble disciples with a living relationship with the Risen Christ.²¹ The *second* aspect of an awakening parish is the gradual emergence of a new missionary mentality where the gates of the parish become continuously open and barriers are broken down.²² Such a parish would look invitational, be open to finding new ways of communicating and relating, where word and welcome would be a central feature of parish life, and there are no exclusion zones. In this vision catechesis becomes everybody's responsibility, not solely the domain of a chosen or trained few. The *third* aspect of

17 DC 79

18 DC 299

19 DC 300, EG 28

20 DC 302

21 DC 303a

22 DC 303b

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this awakening parish is that it would offer a range of experiences that help people know the goodness of the Gospel for themselves and enable them to build faith skills relevant for their everyday living.²³ Examples of this are when a mother realises that the wonder of birth is a God moment as she takes part in baptism preparation, or a person begins to feel that Jesus is walking with them in their cancer treatment because they reflected on scripture in a meaningful way. For most parishes all of the above are very challenging and will not only require a seismic shift in mindsets but also a process of formation of the whole parish community. For this new mindset to become bedded down it will need to be a collaborative endeavour between clergy and lay people, where everyone is learning a new way.

THE LAY MINISTRY OF CATECHIST

Who then might be responsible for this catechesis in the parish? The answer is clear, it's the responsibility of all the baptised,²⁴ but at the same time there are growing numbers of the baptised who feel called to this as a *particular ministry*.²⁵ The role description for this is very clear, the catechist is called to be a witness and a memory keeper,²⁶ communicating knowledge of Christ and the Christian way of life,²⁷ an expert in the art of accompaniment.²⁸ The catechist is a missionary disciple whose tool bag includes being a patient and attentive listener, aware of the action of the Spirit, has an understanding of how a person gradually comes to knowledge of Christ, and the ability to relate well.²⁹ As well as all of this the catechist must have skill in connecting with and making the best use of digital resources, but must always be aware that virtual reality cannot replace direct encounter with people.³⁰ There can also be differing levels of participation in this ministry. For some this role will be a temporary and limited experience, for others it will be a longer-term option to engage in, with support and training. For those who are permanently engaged in this ministry there should be some form of public recognition, so that the whole community can recognise its importance.³¹

A key part of the role of catechist is *enabling* parents to take up

23 DC 303c

24 DC 110 -111,

25 DC 112, 122

26 DC113a

27 DC 113b

28 DC 113c

29 This role description is informed by EG 169 – 173 which provides more detail about personal accompaniment and spiritual growth

30 DC 217

31 DC 123

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their role as active agents in evangelisation.³² This is certainly more important than ever because often what is in place is a ‘mentality of delegation’, where parents think it’s someone else’s role to teach ‘the faith.’³³ Here is one of the key challenges for the parish today, to find ways to enable parents to rediscover their role as the first catechists of their children. Godparents too are named here as part of a whole support system. It might be timely to reconsider the importance of this role beyond just asking a person for family or social reasons. This role is seen as so important that the document suggests choosing someone else as a witness of faith, when this is not easily found.³⁴ There is also a realistic awareness here of the value of faith-filled grandparents who can practise a ministry of availability and encouragement at a moment in life when they may have more time on their hands.³⁵

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE TRAINING AND FORMATION OF CATECHISTS

It is clear from this document that the ministry of catechist is one of *accompaniment*, this is not just an art but a skill. To learn accompaniment catechists must be on the journey of accompaniment themselves, you cannot share what you have not experienced for yourself. Catechists need to be equipped for this delicate ministry.³⁶ The equipment is about building capacities not only to share faith and give witness but about having a certain ‘know how’ – knowing how to be with others is as important as knowing the sources of faith.³⁷ Training should aim at helping the catechist to grow in areas such as *walking* with others where they are, *engaging* with them as active participants in the process of growth.³⁸ Here its more about how the catechist *is* than what the catechist *knows*. If the parish is to become the place where faith is discovered, nourished, and deepened then this kind of training needs to happen now.

32 DC 124

33 DC 124

34 DC 125

35 DC 126

36 DC 263

37 DC 136

38 DC 149