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Developing the Instituted Ministry of Catechist: Exploring Six Organising Principles

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Developing the Instituted Ministry of Catechist: Exploring Six Organising Principles¹

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We are living in rapidly changing times or as Pope Francis has said a change of era.² It is within this context, that the instituted ministry of catechist was announced by Pope Francis.³ In this very short document, Francis describes this ministry as both ancient and new. It is ancient in the sense that when we look at the history of the Church we can see that there have always been a variety of ministries arising from the need of the Church, and the document traces this out. At the same time, it is new in the sense that newly emerging needs now in the Church seem to indicate that within the setting of the pressing need of evangelisation it is time to formalise and strengthen this role.⁴ This development is rooted in a rediscovery of the centrality of baptism and the realisation that baptism is not only a gateway to sacraments but is in itself a sacrament of ministry. All the baptised are anointed for service and confirmation strengthens us once more for service.⁵ This connects intentionally to the original meaning of the word ministry, which is simply service.⁶

LOOKING BACK AT DEVELOPMENTS

Since the second Vatican Council, lay ministries have slowly but surely been developing across the globe. For example, in the United States roles such as parish catechetical leaders, directors

- 1 This article is based upon a workshop given in the Archdiocese of Dublin to a group exploring the role of instituted catechist on the 1st December at the Centre for Mission and Ministry, St. Paul's Church Arran Quay Dublin
- 2 Pope Francis Address to the National Italian Conference, Florence, 10th November 2015
- 3 Pope Francis: *Antiquum Ministerium*, 10th May 2021
- 4 See the Directory for Catechesis (DC) 2020:1 – 5, Pontifical Council for Promoting Evangelisation
- 5 DC 2020: 122
- 6 Edward P. Hahnenberg, *Theology for Ministry: An Introduction for Lay Ministers*, Liturgical Press: Collegeville, Minnesota 2014: 108

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of evangelisation, music ministers and pastoral associates are all recognised as lay ecclesial ministries. Whereas in Germany, the development of roles for laity in pastoral ministries took the form of developing particular areas of expertise, where the pastoral assistant role focused on mainly teaching and counselling, the community assistant on parish outreach and leading liturgy, the administrative assistant on parish administration to support the pastor. As well as this Germany also developed the role of lay preacher, where a trained lay person preaches at community worship. In the Irish context the two most recent and striking examples of the development of lay ministries would be in Dublin and Killaloe, both emerging as a consequence of growing pastoral need.

The role of parish pastoral worker in Dublin is focused around four organising principles: animating, relating, praying and educating. It is a full-time paid ministry and each parish pastoral worker was commissioned for their role by the Archbishop. In contrast to this, Killaloe diocese has recently developed two new lay ministries. The first is a pastoral care ministry with an intentional outreach to nursing homes, the sick and the bereaved. The second role is a catechetical ministry around faith development and sacramental support. Both of these ministries are part-time voluntary ministries commissioned by the Bishop. In each case, these ministries emerged because of ongoing pastoral needs.

KEY FEATURES OF THE ROLE

Within the Dublin development of the role of parish pastoral worker the four organising principles provide an intentionality to it, where *animating* is about team building, gathering, leading, presenting to and developing groups. *Relating* is about the ability to make pastoral connections, building relationships alongside clergy, being available and approachable. *Praying* is not about saying prayers, but having the ability to offer opportunities, devising prayer experiences, planning liturgies, running *lectio divina* and offering parishioners training in reflection skills. Finally, the organizing principle of *educating* is about forming adults for ministries, supporting sacramental preparation, liaising with schools, promoting adult faith development and highlighting the importance of social justice and the care of creation. These organising principles bring clarity and focus to the role, helping the parish and team members to imagine the possibilities of the role and move beyond the idea that this role is about helping Father. It also allows for the giftedness of each person to flourish within the role and develop particular strengths. When we look at the ministry

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of catechist in the *Directory for Catechesis 2020*, we see that it is also structured around organising principles. This helps us to envisage what a catechist can do and the scope there is for future development here in Ireland.

SIX ORGANISING PRINCIPLES

In the new *Directory for Catechesis 2020*, there are *six* organising principles used to describe the scope of the catechists' role.⁷ The breadth and depth of these principles are very useful in enabling us to see the expansive possibilities for lay ministries. Here the catechist is described as a witness of faith and keeper of the memory of God, a teacher and a mystagogue, and accompanier and an educator. These six organising principles need to be unpacked in order to see how each of these aspects can be practically grounded in the pastoral reality of our parishes today.

1. Witness of Faith

It was Paul VI who helped us to see that if modern people are going to listen to teachers, then that is because of their authentic witness to a living relationship with the Lord Jesus.⁸ This is why the ability to witness is a core skill for any catechist. The catechist must be able to simply share their experience of Jesus with others, not only sharing the goodness and truth of the Gospel but also saying 'I know the Lord.' Without this ability to witness, the notion of mission is incredulous. It implies that in any formation, catechists will be helped to build up the confidence to do this well and simply, will be in touch with their own personal story of faith and will be able to help others to share their story too. The quality of the catechists' personal witness will often have more impact than the quantity of input given in sessions. This connects with the original form of catechesis, which was about people who were touched by Christ sharing how it changed their lives. It is a fact that when we really encounter Jesus on our journey of faith, we want to get to know him more.⁹ Just as all of Jesus' methods have one clear objective and that is that 'Jesus evoked and elicited a personal response from his hearers.'¹⁰ It's the role of the catechist to facilitate close encounters with Jesus. These encounters with Jesus happen through reflection on the Gospel, learning to pray, connecting to his presence in the liturgy and in the Christian community.¹¹

7 DC 2020:113

8 Paul Vi, *Evangelii Nuntiandi* 1975:41

9 DC 34

10 DC 161

11 DC 4

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2. Keeper of the memory of God

It is the *Memoria Dei*¹², which informs this concept. This relates to the living presence and action of God in the world and in the Church, celebrated in prayer and liturgy. It is the role of the catechist to enable others to experience this and implies that the catechist will be a person who can help others mine the rich tradition of prayer as well as grow in an understanding of God's presence. This means that in the catechists' way of being present to others they point towards the presence of the divine. Catechists enable others to connect to the presence of God. This implies an invitation to ongoing experiences of prayer, adapted for different ages and stages. The Catechist enables others to reflect, to wonder, to pray, to celebrate and to plumb the depths of God's love. Keeping the active presence of God in everyday life at the centre. Engagement with adults as this level is critical because only adults who are reflecting, praying, celebrating and living their faith can offer convincing and compelling witness to a younger generation. This encounter is experiential and interpersonal. Faith is something that is not just believed, but celebrated, lived daily and prayed.¹³

3. Teacher

It is very easy for us in Ireland to immediately think about a school classroom when we hear the word 'teacher', but the catechist is more than a classroom teacher. The vision of the *Directory for Catechesis* roots the role in the life and ministry of Jesus. Inspired by this, the role of the catechist is about growing in the Jesus way of teaching, learning from him. Jesus used many methods; he sometimes provoked questions, as well as taking time to explain things in depth. He told stories provoking reflection on life and context, he illustrated with example. He enacted how the Kingdom is built, he taught his disciples to pray. The way Jesus taught was always connected to the rich content of the Tradition, rooted in a teaching for change of heart and a new way of life.¹⁴ It is this which informs all that the catechist teaches, and the way that the catechist interacts with others.

4. Mystagogue

This relates to deepening knowledge of Jesus and about the Christian way of life. The term 'mystagogue' originates in writings of the early Fathers of the Church, who offered ongoing formation

¹² <https://www.monasterodibose.it/en/prayer/spiritual-lexicon/447-memoria-dei>

¹³ DC 79

¹⁴ DC 164

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after Christian Initiation. This is the dynamic of the *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults* where, after an adult has celebrated the sacraments of initiation at Easter, they enter into a period of deepening their understanding of Jesus in his Church and the challenge of the Christian way of life. For all who call themselves Christian this is essentially a *life-long ever-deepening* journey. Often in catechesis this element is lost. Putting on the mind of Christ is a life long journey, implying a deepening of relationship. This journey of faith means that with the help of catechesis we can choose the Jesus way of living so that we begin to feel, think and act like Jesus. Catechists enable a dynamic journey that lasts a whole lifetime.¹⁵ It is the task of the catechist to form for living the Christian life, calling for integration. This connects with a faith that does justice. A faith that doesn't do justice is not yet mature, this is an essential element in deepening the journey.

5. Accompanier

In *Evangelli Gaudium*, Pope Francis has called *accompaniment* both a style and an art.¹⁶

In embracing this style the catechist learns to adapt to each person and be flexible in approach. Practising the art of accompaniment implies growing in the ability to listen well, practising patience with the gradual growth of others, openness to the action of the Holy Spirit and commitment to the journey. Led by the experiential questions of the one journeying, the catechist is touched by the questions and confronted by the life situations of participants. As the ministry of the catechist is both an art and a style, it cannot be isolated into simply giving lessons on the content of the catechism. In this accompaniment, there will be more emphasis on *process* than programmes and *continuity* rather than a focus on one off moments. Accompanying cannot be left to one or two individuals, this is why it is important to emphasise the communal nature of catechesis.

6. Educator

It is interesting to see that the *Directory for Catechesis* makes a clear distinction between the catechist as teacher and educator. This relates to Jesus's way of relating to others in what is described as 'its exquisitely educational quality', evoking and eliciting a personal response from his hearers.¹⁷ This *educare*, leading

¹⁵ DC 18

¹⁶ *Evangelli Gaudium* 169 – 175

¹⁷ DC 160 – 161

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or drawing out, requires an ability to listen well and enter fully into the dynamics of human growth, noticing the joys and hopes, sorrows and fears of those being accompanied and relating these to the Gospel.¹⁸ The methodology that Jesus used includes observing facts that everyone in the community is aware of, moving his hearers to question, which then begins a process of reflection. In this reflecting his hearers began to recognise God's presence and call to change.¹⁹ Catechists can gradually learn this way of being with others where the key emphasis is educating for discipleship, for being a member of a believing, praying, celebrating, living community of faith.

FLEXIBILITY OF ROLE

In his letter of the 3rd December 2021, Archbishop Arthur Roche further clarified this new role, as dioceses throughout the world began to explore the possibilities.²⁰ He made it clear that this role of instituted catechist is about much more than teaching the catechism or the Faith. It is about a *broader* ministerial role of leadership, which builds up the Church, in response to a deeper vocational call and in closer collaboration with the ordained.²¹ A key question for many is about whether all who take part in catechetical activity should now become instituted catechists. In terms of development, for going forward, it is envisaged that there will be some who feel called to occasional catechetical ministries for a time, and others who realise that this is their life-long calling. *Some* may engage in ministries such as children's liturgy, baptism preparation, communion preparation, confirmation preparation or as youth catechists for a time. *Others* may emerge in a more stable form of ministry as catechetical leaders who oversee catechetical leadership where they have a broader pastoral care in the absence of a resident priest. This is essentially a missionary model, a ministry of building up the Church in a local setting and perhaps training others. It is in this stable form that catechists are most likely to be instituted. Meanwhile with the formulation of the six organising principles there is great flexibility about this role. Those who feel called to this for life are responding to a call to missionary service of others.²² Stability of ministry means this role is available to the local Church to respond to pastoral need. This

18 DC 113c.

19 DC 200

20 Letter of the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments to the Presidents of the Episcopal Conferences on the Rite of Institution of Catechists, 13.12.2021

21 DC 110, CIC 759

22 *Christus Vivit* 253

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stability also means that a person who is instituted will always be a catechist, even if they do not have a current ministry. Institution is a *public* authentication of a personal call. It celebrates a closer collaboration with the ordained as a co-worker with the Bishop. It is this flexibility that will be key to the development of the role, as we embrace this change of era we are experiencing now in the Irish Church. This could be one of the creative developments of our synodal pathway. It will be important that each diocese now begins to set up a process of accompaniment in order to journey with those who feel called, and that for some this will lead to the formalisation of their role as instituted catechists.

The Fifteenth Station: The Resurrection. I am not sure when the fifteenth station was added to the traditional Stations of the Cross. I have seen some churches where there is a fifteenth station of the cross. However, as far as I am aware most churches still have only fourteen around their walls. The addition of the fifteenth station is a powerful reminder that when the body of Jesus was hastily laid in the tomb, that was not the end. The body of Jesus lay there until that first Easter Sunday morning when Jesus rose from the dead.

– BRYAN SHORTALL OFM Cap, *The Stations of the Cross*, Dublin: Veritas, 2023, p 75/6.