

CATECHESIS AND THEOLOGY

By the eve of Vatican II the dust stirred in the controversy over "kerygmatic theology" had begun to settle. Something of a consensus emerged, at least in catechetical circles, about the relationship between catechesis and theology. They were seen to represent two different facets of the ministry of the Word. Catechesis proclaims the Christian message, theology reflects on it, analyzes and organizes it into an orderly system. Theology speaks to the intellect, catechesis to the whole man. The object of theology is to make revelation intelligible in human terms. The aim of catechesis "is not knowledge as such, but living faith which responds to God's call (message)."¹

The *General Catechetical Directory* issued from Rome in 1971 adopts the same basic Word-of-God framework, but refines it by recognizing that "the ministry of the word takes many forms . . . according to the different conditions under which it is practiced and the ends which it strives to achieve." Allowing that they are closely bound together in "the concrete reality of the pastoral ministry," the *GCD* singles out four forms, each of which is governed by laws proper to itself:

There is the form called evangelization, or missionary preaching. This has as its purpose the arousing of the beginnings of faith so that men will adhere to the Word of God.

Then there is the catechetical form, "which is intended to make men's faith become living, conscious, and active, through the light of instruction."

¹A. M. Nebreda, "East Asian Study Week on Mission Catechesis (Bangkok)," *Lumen Vitae* 17 (1962), 721. Paul Hitz went into great detail about the relationship of theology and catechesis within the kerygmatic framework in "Théologie et catéchèse," *Nouvelle Revue Théologique* 77 (November, 1955), 897-923. It is in the same framework that he severely criticizes many contemporary developments in catechesis; cf., "Réflexions sur la théologie in notre temps," *NRT* 104 (1972), 374-75; 697-704, n.b. note 49. For a brief historical overview of the kerygmatic approach and bibliography, cf. G. Moran, *Catechesis of Revelation* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1966), pp. 20-29.

And then there is the liturgical form, within the setting of a liturgical celebration, especially that of the Eucharist (e.g., the homily).

Finally, there is the theological form, that is, the systematic treatment and the scientific investigation of the truths of faith (No. 17).

It was not the purpose of the *Directory* to spell out the relationship of catechesis to theology in any detail. A few isolated passages touch the issue. "Catechesis begins," it says, "with a rather simple presentation of the entire structure of the Christian message . . . but it must be interested in presenting the content in an always more detailed and developed manner . . ." The work is carried out under the guidance of the magisterium of the Church with "the help which theological research and the human sciences can give" (No. 38). Repeatedly the *GCD* makes the point that catechesis presents the Christian message "in a way appropriate to the various cultural and spiritual conditions of those to be taught" (No. 38). It is "the task of sacred theology and the various other kinds of exposition of Christian doctrine"—not catechetics—"to show a suitable way for ordering truths of faith according to an organic plan in a kind of synthesis which would take just account of their objective hierarchy" (No. 36, cf. No. 46). The catechist must acquire "a strong doctrinal heritage" which at the more advanced levels includes "a degree of scientific theology" (No. 112).²

In short, the *General Directory* describes both theology and catechesis as forms of the ministry of the Word. Theology analyzes and systematizes it, catechesis presents it. Although it adopts the framework of the kerygmatic approach the *GCD* gives catechetics an identity of its own. It reflects the reaction in catechetical and missionary circles against a too exclusive emphasis on the Word of God and a move in the direction of the so-called "anthropological" catechesis. The Word of God is inevitably presented in the words of men in a language which speaks to cultures untouched by or little acquainted with the Christian message.

²I have discussed these passages in my commentary on the *General Catechetical Directory, Catechetics in Context* (Huntington, Ind.: OSV, 1973). Dr. Adolf Exeler makes the point that there is a great deal more to catechesis than the

Meanwhile, back at theology's ranch the same cultural, intellectual, socio-economic and political factors which have shaped modern catechesis were making themselves felt. Vatican II called for a theology that is more biblically and pastorally oriented. In response, theology is taking a radically new look at itself. It is asking fundamental questions: Is it still possible to speak about God? How can it be at once pastoral and at the same time rigorously disciplined and scientific? Modern philosophies and social sciences are not only raising novel questions (as were the natural sciences) but forcing a new look at theological method. The conventional scholastic framework is no longer adequate, and an unexplicated Word-of-God theology is too simple to deal with these complicated issues.

It is in this context that the question about the relationship of catechesis to theology must be asked anew. Most of the fundamental questions that theologians are agonizing over these days are basic issues in catechetics as well: How does one safeguard the unity of faith and at the same time allow for theological pluralism? What anthropological factors influence the act of faith and how? The problems raised by the New Hermeneutic and the debate about religious language have been burning questions in catechesis for some time. The connections and distinctions which link but at the same time distinguish dogma and theology, doctrinal formulations and theological terminology are of no less interest to catechists than to theologians.

If the relationship between catechesis and theology is to be understood and if catechists and theologians are to have mutual respect for one another's tasks, a more sophisticated framework is needed than that supplied by the kerygmatic approach. It is my position that Lonergan's explanation of "functional specialties" can provide the requisite terms of reference.³ This implies that catechesis and theology are not distinguished on the one side, simply "by dividing and subdividing the field of data," to be investigated; or on the other hand, by classifying, according to conceptual categories, the results of investiga-

mere *popularization* of theology and a mechanical mouthing of the magisterial teaching of the Church, cf. *Katechetische Blätter* 96 (November, 1971), 699-700.

³B. Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1972). All page references in the text are to this edition.

tions to be communicated. Functional specializations are distinguished rather by carefully noting and delineating the separate stages of the process which leads from data to results. As a single process of investigation is broken down into discrete steps, each step comes to be recognized as a distinct specialty. The advantage of this approach is that it stresses the interdependence of catechesis and theology and counterbalances the tendency to fragment the theological enterprise. One of the arguments used by Lonergan to support this approach is that it does not prejudice the unity of theology as a science:

It is to be noted that such functional specialties are intrinsically related to one another. They are successive parts of one and the same process. The earlier parts are incomplete without the later. The later presuppose the earlier and complement them. In brief, functional specialties are functionally interdependent (p. 126).

Lonergan distinguishes eight functional specialties in theology: (1) research, (2) interpretation, (3) history, (4) dialectic, (5) foundations, (6) doctrines, (7) systematics, and (8) communications. It is in this last—communications—that catechesis seems best to fit. In fact, *given Lonergan's description* of this eighth functional specialty, I am bold enough to say that catechesis *is* communications. By this I do not mean to sell catechesis short, reducing its function to that of a "messenger boy" for theology (J. M. Lee's phrase).⁴ "Communications," writes Lonergan, "is concerned with theology in its external relations," which he says are of three kinds: (1) interdisciplinary relations with art, language, literature, and other religions, with the natural and human sciences, with philosophy and history; (2) the transpositions that theological thought has to develop if religion is to retain its identity and at the same time speak to men of all cultures and classes, and (3) the adaptations needed to make full and proper use of all available media.

Given the conditions under which catechesis is carried on, it, more than any of the other "functional specialties," is likely to be exploring these "external relations" of theology in creative and fresh ways. Catechists find themselves in exposed positions. Time does not permit them to wait for research teams or systematicians to come up with a plan of

⁴Cf. *The Shape of Religious Instruction* (Dayton: Pflaum, 1971), p. 248.

action. Catechesis must often innovate and improvise until such a time that clearer strategies and better maps are available. It is to Lonergan's credit that he recognizes the dynamic reciprocity among the specialties. Foundations, he says, select doctrines, doctrines set the problems of systematics, systematics fixes the kernel of the message to be communicated, "but there is not to be overlooked the fact of dependence in the opposite direction. Questions for systematics can arise from communications" (p. 142).

In this framework the richness and complexity of catechesis begins to emerge. Concerned as it is with expounding the gospel message, catechesis cannot but be concerned with "meaning" and community. While missionary preaching calls men to faith, catechesis functions within a believing community, within a tradition given unity and cohesion by its common faith in Jesus Christ. Lonergan writes, "community is not just an aggregate of individuals within a frontier, for that overlooks its formal constituent, which is common meaning." Common meaning calls for common experience, complementary ways of understanding, shared values and goals. Thus communications constitute a community and are most effective in the community which shares the broadest commonality of meaning.

It is in this sense that catechesis is an aspect of socialization. It aims to assimilate individuals into the Christian community by making available the experiences and symbols which communicate the meaning and values of the gospel message. Again, a quotation from Lonergan describes the process:

The message announces what Christians are to believe, what they are to become, what they are to do. Its meaning, then, is at once cognitive, constitutive, effective. It is cognitive inasmuch as the message tells what is to be believed. It is constitutive inasmuch as it crystallizes the hidden inner gift of love into overt Christian fellowship. It is effective inasmuch as it directs Christian service to human society to bring about the kingdom of God (p. 362).

It goes without saying that for communications—and by inference, catechesis—to communicate the Christian message one must know it (though in the past theology has been less insistent about the need to practice it). But the cognitive—as far as catechesis is concerned with

it—is only a means to an end. Catechesis aims more directly at conversion, “the transformation of the subject and his world” (p. 130). “Catechesis,” according to the *General Directory*, “performs its function of disposing men to receive the action of the Holy Spirit and to deepen their conversion. It does this through the word, to which are enjoined the witness of life and prayer” (No. 22). It is a question of changing or, at least, extending one’s horizon. Conversion provides the foundations “within which the meaning of doctrines can be apprehended” (p. 131). “Conversion,” says Lonergan,

... is existential, intensely personal, utterly intimate. But it is not so private as to be solitary. It can happen to many, and they can form a community to sustain one another in their self-transformation and to help one another in working out the implications and fulfilling the promise of their new life. Finally, what can become communal, can become historical. It can pass from generation to generation. It can spread from one cultural milieu to another. It can adapt to changing circumstances, confront new situations, survive into a different age, flourish in another period or epoch (pp. 130-31).

Because these functional specialties are not well understood—even by catechists—catechesis has been confused with doctrine on the one hand and systematic theology on the other. It is not *per se* the function of catechesis to teach theology. Dogmas, the sacraments and the commandments are the foundational symbols which it necessarily uses to communicate the gospel message but in themselves—or taken cumulatively—they are not the gospel message. They mediate the common faith—meaning and values—which are the formal element of the Christian community.

This is recognized by the *General Catechetical Directory* which, in many passages, has moved beyond the simple kerygmatic framework. “The summit and center of catechetical formation,” according to the *GCD*, “lies in an ability to communicate the Gospel message” (No. 111). To carry on this task more is required of the catechist than “an accurate formation in theological doctrine.” A mastery of the human sciences and methodology are basic to effective communication and essential to the work of catechesis. While the catechist must acquire “a strong doctrinal heritage” and “a degree of scientific theology,”

... the doctrine ought to be mastered in such a way that the catechist will be able not only to communicate the Gospel message accurately, but also to make those being taught capable of receiving it actively and of discerning what in their spiritual journey agrees with the faith.

The above insights adapted from Lonergan and the *GCD* might be restated and summarized in the categories of classic theology as follows: Both catechesis and systematic theology are concerned with the act of faith, but each emphasizes a different aspect. The prime concern of catechesis is with *fides qua* while that of systematic theology is *fides quae*. (This distinction goes a long way in explaining the shift of focus in contemporary catechesis from "content centered" programs to "client centered" ones.) It is true, as the *Directory* insists, that "a person mature in the faith knows the mystery of salvation revealed in Christ," but it is also true, as Lonergan puts it, that God's gift of love "may precede our knowledge of God and, indeed, may be the cause of our seeking knowledge of God" (pp. 340-41). (Lonergan quotes Pascal's remark, "Take comfort, you would not be seeking me if you had not already found me.") In analyzing the act of faith Juan Alfaro notes that "the inward illumination of grace has no objective content. . . . God reveals and communicates himself to man by no other intermediary than this attraction to himself, and man knows God non-conceptually through the experience of the actual ordination to God . . ." ⁵ The *GCD* makes the point in another way when, quoting the constitution, *Dei Verbum*, of Vatican II, it says,

Faith is a gift of God which calls men to conversion. "For this faith to be given, the grace of God and the interior help of the Holy Spirit must precede and assist, moving the heart and turning it to God, opening the eyes of the mind and giving joy and ease to everyone in assenting to the truth and believing it" (No. 22).

Though it is the prime concern of catechesis to dispose individuals and communities to be open to "the action of the Holy Spirit and to deepen their conversion," (*ibid.*), it is not sufficient "merely to stimulate a religious experience, even if it is a true one" (No. 24). Without

⁵*Sacramentum Mundi*, 2:321.

content faith would be reduced to a purely subjective act. On the other hand, the *fides qua-qua*e distinction helps explain how, in the words of a colleague, one can have "good faith and bad theology." In distinguishing "how" one believes from "what" it allows for the possibility that a person or a community which has not yet achieved maturity of faith can nonetheless be deeply committed and Christian.

Though each of the eight specialties outlined by Lonergan results from experience, insights, judgments of fact and judgments of value, inasmuch as each is a functional specialty within theology it goes about its task in a different manner. The goal of doctrines is "a clear and distinct affirmation of religious realities: its principal concern is the truth of such an affirmation; its concern to understand is limited to the clarity and distinctness of its affirmation." Systematics, on the other hand, "aims at an understanding of religious realities affirmed by doctrines" (p. 349). The goal of communications is to be *effective*. It aims to involve people, primarily Christian believers, in the field of common faith experience and shared meaning. It is constitutive of community, and the stronger the community ties, the more effective communications are.

Joseph Colomb warns against the common tendency to view the communication arts and the human sciences as less essential to catechesis than the sacred sciences.⁶ Catechesis depends on systematics and the other functional specialties but it cannot wait on them to do its work. Nonetheless their interdependence must be constantly stressed. Without communications the other specialties "are in vain," says Lonergan, "for they fail to mature" (p. 355). Without catechesis there would be no Christian community which is the source for the experience, insights and judgments studied in the other specialties. And the reverse is also true: "Systematic theology is irrelevant if it does not provide the basis for . . . communications" (p. 351). It is the task of catechesis to foster the dispositions, nurture the attitudes, prepare the ground and carry on the variety of tasks that are requisites for maturing in the faith. The shared meanings and the common experience which are the basis for Christian community are both the media and the

⁶Cf. *Traduction française et commentaires du Directorium Catechisticum Generale. Catéchèse*, Supp. numero 45 (October, 1971), pp. 169-70.

message of catechesis. Mediated by dogmatic formulas, sacramental practices and other foundational symbols of Catholic tradition, the cognitive element cannot be ignored in catechesis but neither can it be the only, or even the principal, norm in evaluating the effectiveness of the communications enterprise. (Every experienced catechist will confirm Lonergan's assertion, "No repetition of formulas can take the place of understanding," p. 351.)

The theory of catechesis described here is consonant with, even assumed by, the recent statement of the American bishops, *To Teach As Jesus Did*. The episcopal statement describes the educational mission of the Church as

... an integrated ministry embracing three interlocking dimensions: the message revealed by God (*didache*) which the Church proclaims; fellowship in the life of the Holy Spirit (*koinonia*); service to the Christian community and the entire human community (*diakonia*). While these three essential elements can be separated for the sake of analysis, they are joined in the one educational ministry. Each educational program or institution under Church sponsorship is obliged to contribute in its own way to the realization of the three-fold purpose within the total educational ministry (No. 14).

Quoting Ephesians (4:15) it says, "In sum, doctrine is not merely a matter for the intellect, but is the basis for a way of life" (No. 20). In another place, it states, "Community is at the heart of Christian education not simply as a concept to be taught but as a reality to be lived" (No. 23). And, "the experience of Christian community leads naturally to service" (No. 27).

"A real crisis," writes Walter Kasper, "now confronts the basic foundation of theology."⁷ It is a crisis to which catechesis has contributed because it has not been as careful about its goals and self-critical of its methods as it might have. But catechesis has also been a victim of

⁷*The Methods of Dogmatic Theology* (New York: Paulist Press, 1969), p. 3. Raymond Brown explained the background of this crisis in a well publicized talk before the NCEA convention in New Orleans, April 23, 1973. Brown takes a very different track than the one I have followed in this article. He seems to see the task of religious education to be primarily a matter of "communicating the formulas of faith." Cf. *Origins*, NC Documentary Service, April 19, 1973, pp. 690-92.

the crises in that it has not found the guidance from the other functional specialties that it has a right to expect. But before addressing the specific issues and particular questions which plague theologians and catechists alike it is important to agree on how catechesis relates to theology as a whole. The framework offered by Lonergan provides at least a basis for discussion.

BERARD L. MARTHALER, O.F.M. CONV.
The Catholic University of America
Washington, D.C.