

CATECHETICS AND INCULTURATION: THEOLOGICAL PRINCIPLES

This workshop explored the relationship between catechetics and inculturation. The moderator began with a brief description of the history of catechesis in America. It was noted that from the missionary activities of the early settlers of colonial America, through the response of the church to nineteenth century immigrant groups, up until present day catechetical endeavors, catechesis in this country has taken many forms.

Of critical importance to the development of catechesis in the United States were the decisions made by the Plenary Councils of Baltimore, especially the Third Plenary Council. This council mandated the building of Catholic schools in all Catholic parishes and proposed the idea of a common catechism to be used in the United States. Although the church in the nineteenth century had responded to the needs of immigrant groups with various catechisms, some of which were written in English as well as other languages spoken by Catholic immigrants, the Baltimore Catechism was published in 1885 as a common catechism to be used by all groups. The Baltimore Catechism was modeled after the Roman Catechism which was drawn up at the order of the Council of Trent (1545-1563). It maintained the basic format of questions and answers and the organization of doctrinal content according to the Roman Catechism's four categories of creed, sacraments, commandments, and prayer.

The Baltimore Catechism, unaltered except for a slight revision in 1941, became the dominant text used in catechetical instruction in the United States until shortly before the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965).

In the twentieth century catechetics in America increasingly took into account developments in the study and interpretation of scripture. More attention was paid to the role of human experience and the relation of the gospel message to social justice issues. These developments helped to prepare the way for the breakthrough in catechetics which was introduced by the Second Vatican Council.

Two developments initiated by Vatican II which have had a significant influence on catechetics in America are:

- (1) the recognition of the essential role of culture in human lives; and
- (2) the recognition of the central role of local churches in manifesting different cultural expressions of Christianity.

In 1976, the document *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, issued by Paul VI, affirmed the teaching of Vatican II on the importance of culture in the lives of persons and also marked a turning point in the church's understanding of the role of culture in evangelization and catechesis. This document stressed the importance not only of understanding the different cultures of peoples to whom the gospel is preached; but

also acknowledged the significant role of culture in determining how people hear, accept and express the gospel message.

In discussing the role of culture in catechesis, the participants in the workshop shared many experiences in which the language, symbols, and customs of different racial and ethnic groups not only enhanced their catechetical experiences but also made their liturgical celebrations much more meaningful.

However, one difficulty that was pointed out by one of the participants was the division that is sometimes brought about in parish life when many groups with different cultural expressions celebrate liturgy separately and do not experience a united parish celebration. While cultural pluralism is a desired goal of catechetics in the light of the teachings of the Second Vatican Council, achieving unity in diversity is equally as important.

The discussion of cultural diversity led the group to question the development of suitable textbooks and other catechetical materials which would serve the many ethnic and racial groups of America. It was agreed that it is essential for catechists to realize that America is a land of many cultures and cultures within cultures. It is important to be aware of the different needs of members of racial and ethnic groups for appropriate catechetical methods and materials. In addition to acknowledging the different cultural needs of racial and ethnic groups, the workshop participants noted the importance of being aware of the impact of mass culture on individuals and groups today. This mass culture is characterized by electronic, printed, and verbal images which influence consciousness on a global scale.

The discussion of suitable catechetical textbooks led some members of the group to question why so many college level students appear to be "Catholic illiterates." It was pointed out that many young Catholic women and men lack an understanding of basic Catholic doctrines and have no awareness of the history and traditions of the church. While this lack was considered to be a serious concern which needs to be remedied, it was also noted that catechesis ought not to concentrate exclusively on the transmission of doctrine. Catechesis which focuses solely on doctrinal matters and does not reflect on the life experience of those to whom the gospel message is being announced has been found to be ineffective.

A discussion of the role of human experience led the group to reflect on the impact on catechetics of the renewal of the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA). It was pointed out that the implementation of the RCIA has helped many persons to come to an understanding of the relationship between catechetical instruction and ritual celebration. The process of the RCIA not only demonstrates how ritual or liturgical celebration emerges from the life experience of the faithful; it also has focused the catechetical process on adults. Although religious educators in the United States and Canada today predominantly concentrate on the instruction of elementary and high school age children; the need for an increasing emphasis on adult catechesis was stressed.

The topic of adult catechesis raised many questions concerning the role of the theologian in relation to contemporary catechesis. The great need for collaboration among members of the theological community and those involved in various aspects of catechetical ministry was strongly affirmed by the members of the workshop. While it is the task of the theologian to reflect on and systematically interpret the complex system of memories, images, stories, and symbols of con-

temporary cultures in the light of the teachings of the faith; at the same time the catechist needs the systematic reflection of the theologian to help interpret the experiences of life in the light of the gospel.

Two developments which are emerging in catechesis which stimulate the reflection of persons on their life experience are lectionary-based catechesis and shared Christian praxis. In these processes small groups reflect on and apply the message of the gospel to the real events of their lives in order to commit themselves to a Christian way of living. Both lectionary-based catechesis and shared Christian praxis emphasize the formation of small groups in which catechesis and ritual celebration are united.

The most significant impact of inculturation on catechesis will be the emergence of the world church. The church of the future will not be a Roman Church that has simply been exported to other lands, but will instead be a united church in which Christianity is expressed in a rich diversity of culturally distinct manifestations. In order for this to come about it is necessary for the members of the church who serve in different disciplines and ministries to collaborate with each other.

The members of this workshop themselves set an excellent example of the type of collaboration that is necessary in the fields of theology and catechesis in the church today. The discussion which was carried on from the perspective of academic experience and pastoral involvement was insightful and rewarding.

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