



# The Truth Will Set You Free

by Caroline Farey, Director of the BA in Applied  
Theology (Catechesis) at Maryvale Institute

## TOWARDS GETTING CATECHETICAL METHOD RIGHT

There have been two very 'hot topics' in the Church since the Second Vatican Council, that surpass all others if one takes as one's measure the number of documents on the subject that have come from Rome in the last forty years. These are the liturgy and catechesis. Concern for the liturgy has been taken up by a large number of Catholics who read avidly what the Pope, Bishops and curia have to say, and conferences and courses on the renewal of liturgical practice are well subscribed. On the other hand, not catechesis itself, but the Church's documents on catechesis, are taken up by very few indeed; the Church's vision here is rather like an abandoned orphan. Few seem aware, let alone interested beyond a glance, of the nature and degree of renewal being urged upon us in successive documents on the subject.

For many it is a case of 'know the faith and teach it – what else is there to say?' *The General Catechetical Directory*, however, speaks of those with this attitude as "unable to appreciate how profound is the proposed renewal, as if it were merely a matter of eliminating ignorance of doctrine."<sup>1</sup> The Church's documents focus on catechesis as an "integral Christian formation", that is, as holistic education in the faith based on the pedagogy of God, rather than instruction alone. This article is concerned with the Church's understanding of catechetical pedagogy. This pedagogy flows from doctrine, and good methods flow from this pedagogy.

Let us begin with a paragraph, in the midst of a wealth of advice and direction, from the *General Directory for Catechesis*:

'The Church, in transmitting the faith, does not have a particular method nor any single method. Rather she discerns contemporary methods in the light of the pedagogy of God'.<sup>2</sup>

Here, the Church indicates that for catechesis, discerning and choosing the method of communication of the Faith of the Church needs careful consideration. This task, we are told, depends upon knowing what the Church means by the 'pedagogy of God' and then on specific and deliberate attention to discerning catechetical methods in its light.

Priests and catechists, then, need a *double* formation for effective catechesis in accordance with the mind and heart of the Church. They need a formation, firstly, in a knowledge and appreciation of the deposit of Faith itself. Priests, of course, receive this in the seminary and it is their responsibility to pass it on, and, especially, to ensure that parents and catechists receive this in due measure. Secondly, priests and catechists both need formation in the 'pedagogy of God' and then in how to examine methods and methodologies in its light, in order to discern those methods that are appropriate for communicating the Faith and those that are not.

Very often it is believed that parents, and especially teachers, know so much more than the priest does about *methods* to use for communicating the Faith (other than preaching, in which the priest is especially trained). Knowledge and skill in various 'methods of communicating' are seen to come, either

directly from 'experience with young people', or from 'teacher-training', or from the frequent use of published resources that have methods of teaching written into them by 'experienced' people.

People may be called 'experienced' because of what they have been doing for many years. Yet this does not mean that they are experienced in the 'pedagogy of God' or in discerning appropriate methods of communication in accordance with it. For catechists to learn how to choose this or that activity or method they need considerable help in this type of assessment and awareness, discernment and judgement. The task can seem to be rather more demanding than most people are prepared for.

An especially helpful work to assist this discernment was published recently, called *The Catechism of the Catholic Church and the Craft of Catechesis*, San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2008.<sup>3</sup> The three authors have been involved in the formation of catechists for many years and have helped countless catechists precisely in how to discern and choose the most appropriate methods in the light of God's own *pedagogy* as elucidated in the Catechism of the Catholic Church.

The Catechism is acknowledged generally as an outstanding contribution to making the content of the faith of the Church accessible. The book, *The Catechism of the Catholic Church and the Craft of Catechesis*, is unique in its study of the Catechism not only from the point of view of its content, but also for its catechetical pedagogy. Cardinals Joseph Ratzinger and Christoph Schönborn have provided considerable teaching on the Catechism from this pedagogical point of view which these authors bring to our attention, providing pedagogical principles by which catechists can judge all the various methods and activities they use in their regular catechetical sessions.

The authors of the book on the *craft* of catechesis are each so soaked in both the Faith of the Church and the exercise of catechising that they are able to see, more profoundly than many, the extraordinary pedagogical guidance embedded in the Catechism. The pedagogy flows directly from the nature and content of the deposit of faith. The Catechism is not simply an account of the Faith, it is a carefully designed instrument to assist in passing on the Faith. To know God's pedagogy is to follow God's way of communicating Himself to man, in Christ through His Church; the Catechism reveals precisely this.

## AN EXAMPLE OF THE PEDAGOGY OF GOD

The book on *The Craft of Catechesis* has a concrete example of how the pedagogy of God can be used to discern good catechetical method:

'Let us examine how the Catechism, in and through its very structure, calls for and enables a holistic formation in, and transmission of, the Faith. As we know, the Catechism is structured in four parts, relating to the areas of the Creed, the liturgy, life in Christ, and prayer. The Catechism is not arranged like this arbitrarily, but because these are the four dimensions of the Christian Faith, and therefore the four

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dimensions of a living faith in each one of us’ (p. 16, cf. CCC 3, and Acts 2:42).

It is clear from this that catechesis is to be concerned with all four dimensions, is to be four-dimensional.

Just as the *Catechism* links each of the parts to each other, so catechetical sessions, together with the Christo-centric doctrine to be imparted,<sup>4</sup> can be linked to the liturgical life of the Church, to moral life ‘in Christ’ and to prayer.<sup>5</sup> This is a fundamental pedagogical principle for holistic catechesis, that is, catechesis that nourishes all four dimensions of the Christian life. This would mean ensuring not only a time for imparting some aspect of doctrine, but also a link to the consequences of the particular *doctrine* (of the session) for *life* ‘in Christ’, a time of *prayer* linked to the same doctrine and a liturgical element or link to the *liturgy* in some way. How many resources follow such a structure and how many priests or catechists realise the richness of following such a structure for their catechetical sessions?

The pedagogical principle of structuring one’s catechetical sessions holistically in the four-fold way described above, is one of twelve principles that the authors have drawn from the *Catechism*, concerning faithfulness and coherence, prayer, Scripture, liturgy, grace and beauty. *Communication* of the Faith or ‘the *craft* of catechesis’ can be more or less according to the Faith of the Church just as the *content* can be more or less according to the Faith of the Church. Just because someone is teaching, doesn’t mean that anyone is learning. True communication means that learning is taking place. True catechesis means that Christ is being communicated. This is why the Church’s documents are insistent upon methods of catechetical communication following an appropriate pedagogy.

The twelve principles drawn from the *Catechism* are a totally different type of guide to those taken from typical developmental or educational theories. Some educational theories, largely developed in the second half of the twentieth century, were of value for helping teachers to recognise the specific characteristics of different age groups and different kinds of learning. The *General Directory for Catechesis* acknowledges that these theories can sometimes be useful in part but they are not sufficient. The pedagogy of God, which is ‘universally valid’, is also needed and by this all catechetical theories, skills and methods are to be judged.

### AN EXAMPLE OF DISCERNMENT OF METHOD

Let us look at a typical contemporary method sometimes called the ‘pastoral cycle’ sometimes ‘shared praxis’. This tends to have between three and five steps or short periods of time, from ten to twenty minutes each. For example, one three-step programme of this kind divides its sessions into three periods: ‘life as we know it – God’s message – new life or message for my life’.<sup>6</sup> Secular stories and discussion questions are used to stimulate the sharing of experience either at step one or step three or both. The questions are focused on the participants’ lives and opinions. ‘God’s message’ tends to be the shortest moment. Let us analyse what typically happens.

- Firstly, one loses control of the content of the session because many differing points of view can be expressed, often taken from the media or from a typical human point of view; often disparate or far ranging; some opinions tangential; others wholly opposite to the faith. The Church, on the other hand, recognises a good catechetical method as one that ‘guarantees fidelity to content’.<sup>7</sup>
- Secondly, the session quickly moves into the realm of psychology rather than catechesis if one asks about personal background, emotions, feelings, opinions and so on, all of which need great sensitivity. What does the catechist do with the range of feelings, ideas and opinions presented? Are they to be ignored, passed over with a smile, a murmur of thanks, accepted without comment, corrected? Not one of these possibilities seems appropriate in a time set aside for catechesis.
- Thirdly, if one does try to speak of the Faith of the Church after this, it will likely be *corrective* of what someone has said, placing the catechist and that participant in a difficult situation. Not everything that has been said can be corrected and many of the false opinions will, then, be confirmed by the occasion, or the catechist ameliorates the Faith in order not to hurt the feelings of someone in public.
- Fourthly, the Faith of the Church tends to need to be given in a *defensive* manner because of what has been said that is contrary to it – this puts the catechist in a position of needing conviction, clarity and argument as well as knowledge because stating the Faith now looks simplistic, contradictory, like another personal opinion, or, if objectively stated, dogmatic in the negative sense. A catechist is often not equipped for this and the Faith simply not given.
- Finally, far from making it easier to enter into the Faith of the Church, participants have been led into spending their time and attention on typical human responses that they hear all week, and by this may have been led even further away than they were before. The short, precious opportunity so desired by God as a moment for evangelization has been cut short and nothing of the principle of holistic catechesis is yet achieved.

It is not possible to speak here of all the principles or how to translate them into positive catechetical methods in a short article of this kind. This article is an attempt to awaken people to the need to seek out the kind of renewal of methodology to which the Church exhorts us so that the Faith is learnt again holistically, for life, for prayer and, ultimately, better to enable people to love to worship.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup>GCD 9 (not my italics).

<sup>2</sup>GDC148 (my italics).

<sup>3</sup>Dr Petroc Willey, (Maryvale Institute, Birmingham, UK), Rev Dr Pierre de Cointet (Studium Notre Dame de Vie, France) and Mrs Barbara Morgan (Franciscan University, Steubenville, US), *The Catechism of the Catholic Church and the Craft of Catechesis*, with an introductory essay by Christoph Cardinal Schönborn, San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2008.

<sup>4</sup>‘Every mode of presentation must always be christocentric -trinitarian’ (GDC 100).

<sup>5</sup>See, for example, GDC 7: ‘The Catechism of the Catholic Church is ‘a principal requirement for catechesis’.

<sup>6</sup>Diana Klein, *Preparing to be Confirmed*, Great Wakering: McCrimmons, 2002, p8. <sup>7</sup>GDC 159.