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The Function of Catechesis in the Church

Antoinette Yindjara Beanzoui

Catechesis is an important activity in the life of a given church. It is not the church's entire mission, but, according to the mandate given by Christ, it is the responsibility of the entire church. (Mt 28:19) The goal of catechesis, therefore, is to make disciples of all nations and, as Pope John-Paul II said, to put people "in communion, in intimacy with Jesus Christ." To make disciples is the responsibility, the evangelizing mission of the entire church. The question that arises is, How is this responsibility understood by the various local churches around the world? How do specific practices challenge the church's catechetical responsibility? Who are the catechizers and who are the catechized? The answer to these questions requires first knowing what the church is.

How does the church understand its catechetical responsibility?

The Latin word for church *ecclesia* is derived from the Greek *ekklesia*, which designated the popular assembly of citizens in ancient Athens. Early Christians adopted the word *ecclesia* to designate the gathering of those who believed in Jesus Christ. "Church," therefore, has several meanings.

The church is the assembly of all believers, both living and dead. It is invisible, for it comprises all believers in the world, but it is also visible, for it manifests itself locally. The church, the living community of the disciples of Christ, is not a reality alien to this world. As the people who witness to Christ and as a part of the human family, it lives among people as a community of sharing for the purpose of ensuring that the word of Christ continues to be "living and efficacious."

The church exists because Jesus wanted his ministry among women and men, which had been interrupted by the Passion, to be continued for the sake of their liberation, for the sake of their reintegration into intimate dialogue with God and the experience of mutual co-existence. It is in this way that he fulfilled his mission as the messenger of the kingdom of God. The first [task] of the church is to enable every human being in principle to hear this message, this "good news." In this sense, the mission of the church is by definition apostolic. It must see itself as responsible for knowledge of the gospel, and especially for ignorance of this gospel, an ignorance which can never be justified. The problem is that of reconciling Christian life and everyday life, which is not an easy task. Human beings are predestined to happiness, and it is important to make children aware of this, to encourage them to live according to the law of love, to embark upon the adventure of life with confidence and the strength to act rightly. Living as a Christian implies making choices which bring happiness even if these choices may sometimes appear difficult. We must make this message heard. Do Christians live in a world of their own? No, Christians live in this world, and that is why we, the church, have as our duty to help children to discover their calling, to assume a role in society, to have the courage to speak out, to serve the men and women of their time.

It is in this sense that catechesis is to be regarded as an essentially pastoral function of the church. It builds and edifies the church. Because it is essentially pastoral, it must rely on the methods of evangelization: initial proclamation and follow-up. The church must assume responsibility for its own future. This means passing faith on from generation to generation. It is the church's survival that is at stake. This transmission is not merely that of verbal phrases or of knowledge, but of a faith that lives and is practiced in the actions of everyday life.

Catechesis occupies a pivotal place in the life of the church, and one of the most sensitive as well. In this regard, Didier Piètra said: "Catechesis is the church's catalyst, revealing its tensions, its contradictions, offering it a mirror in which to see its true face."

A healthy church is healthy because of its catechesis. It is absolutely necessary to place catechesis within the framework of the church's action; [to situate] its status, its role and its significance as part of the overall ministry of the church. The church's responsibility is not to confine catechesis to an activity, but for it to be fostered and nurtured through the life of the entire church. Catechetical work therefore is not to be carried out in isolation from the life of the community, or alongside it. The life of faith is a learned experience, both through catechism and through participation in Christian life. It used to be that when children came to catechism they already had an inkling about Christian life and some exposure to it. Today, many children attending catechism are unbaptized. Christian communities and catechists have to deal with children, adolescents and adults who are deprived, ignorant, without spiritual yearning.

Our communities need to become re-accustomed to experiencing the sharing of faith. Church leaders should stimulate such sharing. They should create spaces where everyone can seek counsel, share their joys, concerns and doubts. All persons sharing the responsibility of transmitting the faith of the church should have a space where they can share their experiences and listen to the experiences of others, a space where everyone can talk about their lives and learn about the lives of others. Our church communities should be the mirror image of the Trinity.

Catechesis is the reflection of an ecclesiology; the objectives it sets and the way in which it is organized presuppose a certain type of church. Willingly or unwillingly, consciously or unconsciously, catechesis serves a church concept that is proposed, but not imposed. The church defines the orientation of catechesis, its theology, its organization and the methods and means used by its facilitators. Unfortunately, more and more frequently we see catechesis given secondary importance in our churches. It is entrusted to improvised catechists who are poorly trained, resulting in an unconvincing catechesis forming unconvinced Christians.

Consequently, the church must respond to two questions with regard to catechesis:

Of what vision of the church should catechesis be the expression and application?

What is the church concept that catechesis is intended to foster?

According to Samuel Mothébo, "A catechetical concept goes hand in hand with an ecclesiological concept." The harmonization of catechesis at the national level must be envisaged. The church is an object of faith. It is for this reason that it is included in the third article of the Apostles' Creed: "I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic Church," and again in the Nicene

Creed: “In one holy catholic and apostolic Church.” These two texts of the Early Church invite us to place ecclesiology in the context of the incarnation and pneumatology. The church defines itself as the people of God, the body of Christ and the temple of the Holy Spirit. It is the people of God because it is born of God’s plan. It is the servant of this plan of Gods for humanity and the world. It recalls its origin in the people of the Bible as the chosen people, the people of the covenant. The church is also the body of Christ, meaning that Christ is the head. The body as the symbol of the church is not to be understood metaphorically. Rather, it underscores the concrete, practical, bodily aspect of having faith. Lastly, the church is the temple of the Holy Spirit; it is the ordained place where the Holy Spirit can be experienced. Christ exists in a pneumatological way and in himself. The Spirit remains sovereignly free. It is given to the church as a grace, to enable the church to guide, govern, inspire and sanctify. But the Spirit can leave the church, since it is its Lord. The church is constantly compelled to become what it is: one, holy and universal (catholic). These attributes have been given to it; the church did not make them up. But it is called upon to give them expression, to manifest them in its life and witnessing.

Conclusion

Catechesis is an extremely broad topic and we do not presume to treat exhaustively. We simply wanted to make a modest contribution by saying that there is a veritable catechesis crisis in our churches. This vital ministry, requiring adequate training and theological competence, is increasingly abandoned to people who are not up to the task. People are hastily prepared for baptism or confirmation without conviction. Catechesis should not constitute a closed system, but rather be an open-ended process, a continuous life-long process of consolidation. The church is a sociological, that is, public, reality. Consequently, it must incorporate social topics such as work, justice, peace and solidarity. The church must be able to read the signs of the times in order not to fall into the sin of inertia and abdication. More intensive pastoral ministry must time and again incite the church to ask itself what other preachers are bringing to their congregations and what we are offering to ours. Doing this implies taking into account, in our theological reflection, the challenges, the dead ends, all the acute existential questions related to everyday life in different societies. Poverty is a challenge for Christianity in Africa, particularly in a country such as mine [Central African Republic], where the poor, the destitute, peasants and the voiceless are victims of hunger, illness and death. Our God is a God that brings life, who rejects any system that engenders famine and death. Teaching the catechism here must be an awareness-building effort involving the community also, because it is within the church that is experienced the power of the Lord. It is there, too, that the work of implementing real conditions of human liberation and nurturing is carried out.

Christ made promises that it is up to us to accomplish. “Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let the one who believes in me drink . . . Out of the believer’s heart shall flow rivers of living waters” (Jn 7:37-38). And also, “I have come that they might have life, and have it abundantly” (Jn 10:10). Is there a greater promise than this that can move us more? Christ brings us life. He thus has the right to speak about joy. ”I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete” (Jn 15:11).