

PRAYER AT THE HEART OF CATECHESIS

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Nobody is in any doubt that prayer forms part of catechesis. Here I would like to show why it is at the very heart of catechetical action. I will do this beginning from the catechesis of little children, which focuses us on the main aim of the catechetical work of the Church. This experience shows that prayer is the doorway and the soul of catechesis; it also shows the irreplaceable value of prayer as an educator of faith, and finally it takes a central place because of the very nature of catechesis in the Church.

1. Catechesis of little children – a paradigm?

We begin with the experience of the catechesis of little children. One can be little by reason of age or because of a handicap, illness, moral or human poverty, old age, etc. To transmit the faith to these little ones places participation in the mission of the Church at the heart of catechesis, by conveying the divine revelation that coincides with the benevolent plan of the Father, and which is summarised in the first paragraph of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* as follows:

God, infinitely perfect and blessed in himself, in a plan of sheer goodness freely created man to make him share in his own blessed life. For this reason, at every time and in every place, God draws close to man. He calls man to seek him, to know him, to love him with all his strength. He calls together all men, scattered and divided by sin, into the unity of his family, the Church. To accomplish this, when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son as Redeemer and Saviour. In his Son and through him, he invites men to become, in the Holy Spirit, his adopted children and thus heirs of his blessed life. (CCC,1)

This is why *Catechesi Tradendae* (5) strongly emphasises that the goal of catechesis is immediate and intimate communion with Jesus Christ. The little child lives in this immediacy. At his level the processes are very simple, even poor in their nature. He does not rise progressively through different processes (the rational, human, sacramental, ecclesial...) towards the immediacy of a personal meeting with Christ. Instead catechesis begins with the immediacy of the meeting and returns to it continually. True, the more the child grows the more his body and discursive intelligence develop. But is not the goal of these mediations the immediacy of love, here below in the present and through a face-to-face vision in the hereafter, through the unique Mediator?

We can therefore say the catechesis of little children is a paradigm for the whole of catechesis. It is in this light that one can discover why prayer seems like both the doorway and the soul of catechesis.

2. Prayer: doorway and soul of catechesis

First of all it is a fact of experience that the little child spontaneously marvels at and praises the Creator. This movement of thanksgiving (which precedes the apprenticeship of learned prayers) opens his heart and his understanding to the Word. Prayer is the doorway which opens to the Word of God.

This is why there are times for prayer, but above all for an atmosphere of prayer which can impregnate the whole of catechesis. Prayer is not only a preparation and a prolongation of catechesis. The proclamation of the Word is sprinkled with moments of personal encounter with God (planned and spontaneous moments, offered to all or sought by particular persons). The Word is received in prayer, and prayer nourishes itself from the Word.

Prayer, '*a covenant relationship between God and man in Christ*', and '*action of God and of man, springing forth from the Holy Spirit and ourselves*' (CCC, 2564) animates catechesis; it is its vital principle. Here it is a question of '*the simple expression of the mystery of prayer*' (CCC, 2724); '*the prayer of the child of God, of the forgiven sinner who agrees to welcome the love by which he is loved and who wants to respond to it by loving even more.*' (CCC, 2712) In effect, by the grace of baptism, '*the love of God has been poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit which has been given us.*' (Rom 5:5) We are capable of entering into a relationship with God because he himself is given to us (the term '*poured out*' used here by St Paul has a strong sense: the love of God is poured out among us like the waters of a strongly flowing river). We are not only men with a body, reason and free will, but we have in us a life of children of God. We are sharers in the divine nature. (2Pet 1:4) We have a share in God himself, in his Being of Love. Through baptism, there is in us a life which is of the same nature as God's. Both the meeting of the finite with the infinite and the communion between the creature and the Creator, the covenant between man the sinner and the thrice-holy God, are possible and real, in spite of the infinite distance which will always separate them. Prayer realises this dialogue and this communion of life (CCC, 2565). With Fr Marie Eugene's teaching in *I want to see God* we can summarise its essential characteristics:

It is then a contact with God, an actualization of the supernatural union that grace establishes between God and our souls; or again, an exchange between two loves: that which God has for us, and that which we have for Him..... In order to meet this Love that is God, we have sanctifying grace, of the same nature as God and consequently love like him. This grace, which makes us His children, is an aptitude for union, for friendly exchange or intercourse with God, for reciprocal penetration.... Independent of any external forms set up in advance, Teresian prayer knows no other law than the free expression of two loves which meet and give themselves to each other. (pp 54.56)

Prayer is an orientation towards a God of supernatural love who makes us his children, and an encounter with the God of Love, and an exchange of love with him; and it is the heart of filial life that it is the purpose of catechesis to develop.

3 Prayer: educator of faith

Catechesis expresses itself as the transmission of faith (of the Church) and education in faith (as a personal action) (Cf. *Catechesi Tradendae*, 1). Through catechesis, the Church teaches us to

say *'I believe'* (CCC, 166-167). Believing is an ecclesial and human act: *'The Church's faith precedes, engenders, supports and nourishes our faith'* (CCC, 181), which is *'a personal adherence of the whole man to God who reveals himself.'* (CCC, 176) Prayer, having indissoluble personal and community dimensions, provokes and nurtures this faith.

A catechesis which bathes in an atmosphere of prayer develops in the little child a movement of his whole being towards God. Listening, obeying, praying, believing, etc. are not experienced as duties but as a call. The spiritual enthusiasm and the fundamental attitudes of man before God are awakened. Spirituality is educated by the beauty of the Word of God and the faith of the Church. However, it is not always easy for a little child to make an act of faith; there are resistances at the level of feelings and of developing reason, and above all there are objections posed by those around and by the wider environment that the child notices and assimilates more or less consciously -- thus the importance of prompting a true response of faith that is both free and personal. In catechesis, prayer is no longer the time for speaking and reflecting. It is an action of personal commitment in faith, a personal response from man to a God who reveals himself. A child aged ten said: *'I no longer know whether I believe or not.'* But he continued in prayer. He experienced simultaneously the difficulty of believing and the certainty of faith. His rational difficulties did not put in doubt either his personal commitment to prayer in the life of faith nor the knowledge of God which stems from it.¹ Catechesis united to prayer brings one to maturity of faith.

Another child asked: *'Do you believe that if I pray to the Holy Spirit he will bless my understanding?'* The child perceives in a confused way that, supported and illuminated by the Holy Spirit in prayer, faith brings one to a true knowledge of God and his mystery: *'The grace of faith opens the eyes of your hearts to a lively understanding of the contents of Revelation, that is, of the totality of God's plan and the mysteries of faith, of their connection with each other and with Christ, the centre of the revealed mystery.'* (CCC, 158)

Furthermore, education in the interior life prepares the little child to listen to the voice of his conscience. This instils in a person the practice of entering into himself to find God there and to obey him in the concrete circumstances of existence. Far from being separated from moral life, prayer allows one to grow in love and in moral discernment by the *'depth of perception'* which Paul asks for the Philippians. (Phil 1:9)

Finally, the personal encounter with God does not lead on to an individualist faith; the little child opens himself naturally to intercession; he opens up his prayer to those who live near him and little by little to those who are far from him, living and dead. Prayer opens him to the community. In an incarnate way he discovers the communion of saints and lives out an ecclesial charity.

This prayer is essentially a prayer of faith (CCC, 2611). It is born of faith and develops in faith, *'a filial adherence to God beyond what we feel and understand.'* (CCC, 2609). Impregnated with prayer, catechesis does not limit itself to the transmission of knowledge. It becomes a constant call to put into action the theological virtue of faith, which, with charity and hope, the gifts of the Holy Spirit and the moral virtues, forms part of *'the whole organism of the Christian's supernatural life'*. (CCC, 1266)

¹ *Ten thousand difficulties do not make one doubt.* (Newman, in CCC, 157)

Just as the body and the understanding develop by appropriate exercise, prayer causes faith to grow by successive acts and by an attitude which progressively develops. In effect prayer is nothing other than the putting into action of the theological virtues under the influence of the Holy Spirit. Grace is grafted onto our human nature. It raises up the whole life of the soul and of man, to allow him to live as a child of God. Like any life, states Fr Marie-Eugene, our baptismal life has powers through which it acts: *'the power of knowledge, which is faith, causing us to adhere to God; the power to move toward God, which is hope; and the power of union, which is charity. This supernatural entity of baptismal grace is attached to the faculties of the soul. Faith is engrafted on the intellect, because the intellect has the power to know'* (*Where the Spirit breathes*, p 42) Thus, in prayer, our essential activity consists in making acts of faith, in maintaining an awakened faith before God, in love. As we see in the gospel, faith is necessary and sufficient to penetrate into the mystery of Christ, to have a share in the salvation that he gives. It allows immediate contact with God. Thus one understands the importance of prayer of faith for catechesis. It is through prayer that we grow in the filial life of the little child, which we are all called to become. To make contact with the Father in faith is the essential act of the child of God, *'the human act par excellence'*, as Fr Marie-Eugene says, *'because it is already a divine act'*: *'Prayer, contact with God, is already the exercise of eternal life. It is the exercise of heaven, the realization of the works that we shall perform there... Prayer therefore is not something incidental in our life. It is the Christian act par excellence, the preparation for our eternity....'* (*Where the Spirit breathes*, pp 70-71)

4. The sacramental nature of catechesis and the exercise of faith

Finally, prayer is at the heart of catechesis because of its very nature. In effect, *Catechesi Tradendae* emphasises:

The primary and essential object of catechesis is... the mystery of Christ. Catechizing is in a way to lead a person to study this mystery in all its dimensions.... It is therefore to reveal in the Person of Christ the whole of God's eternal design reaching fulfilment in that Person. It is to seek to understand the meaning of Christ's actions and words and of the signs worked by him, for they simultaneously hide and reveal his mystery. (CT, 5)

Here the term mystery indicates a sacramental dimension. Following Vatican II, the *Catechism* includes the analogical use of the notion of sacrament. (Cf. CCC, 774) As the theologian Daniel Bourgeois notes, *'the notion of sacramentality is coextensive with the whole Christian mystery.'* (*La pastorale de l'Eglise*, p 232) However little one perceives the analogy, it allows one to grasp in one unified vision the mystery of Christ in the Church, and thus of the whole of Revelation, of which Christ is *at the same time the Mediator and the fulfilment*, (*Dei Verbum*, 2) and also of the Tradition, which is nothing other than the Church herself perpetuating and transmitting to each generation (in her doctrine, her life and her worship), *all that she is in herself and all that she believes* (DV, 8). Such is catechesis, as a particular moment in the transmission of revelation in and through the Church.

Besides, the Roman Catechism reminds us that a sacrament is *a visible sign of an invisible grace instituted for our salvation* (Part 2, chap 1, v 4). As a sign, it refers us to something beyond itself, the divine reality that is signified. In every sacramental reality the discovery of its meaning and its vital realisation are inseparable. As Cardinal Ratzinger points out in *Principles of Catholic Theology* (1987), *'This is why the event which, as a sign, opens us to the understanding of the*

sign, coincides with conversion. For conversion is precisely the entry of our visible life into relationship with God.' Thus, in catechesis, everything that has to do with the sign (holy Scripture, the faith of the Church, exegesis, liturgical gestures and all the other elements used to lead us to Christ) engages us in the mystery of the personal relationship with God. The sign brings us to the *res*, the grace of salvation.

How does the *res* produce its fruit in the person? Certainly the sacraments (in the strict sense) are efficacious because in them Christ himself is at work (CCC, 1127). However, they presuppose faith (faith of the Church and personal faith), and their subjective fruits depend upon the dispositions of those who receive them. (CCC, 1123 and 1128) In effect faith alone is able to penetrate the sign to arrive at the *res* towards which it tends: *'the act of the believer does not end with what is said, but with reality.'* (Aquinas, ST, II-II Qu.1 a. 2) This is why catechesis, in its sacramental structure, cannot bear its fruit in a person except in the measure of the faith of the one who receives it. It is of course a question of a faith that is alive because it is animated by charity (CCC 1814). Prayer is the essential place in which this living faith is operative, develops and is strengthened. It is thus at the heart of catechesis: of its theology, its method, and its practice.

In his Apostolic Letter for the new millennium, John Paul II calls us to the personal experience of an intimate dialogue with Christ, to learn about him and to teach him, to arrive at *'a Christian life distinguished above all in the art of prayer.'* (*Novo Millennio Ineunte*, 32). This exhortation should be translated into action, not only in a personal commitment but also in a practical pedagogy. We are invited to make all our communities, including activities of catechetical formation, *'genuine schools of prayer'* (NMI, 33). It is not a matter of an optional appendix but a central necessity to provoke, transmit, and educate faith.

But it would be wrong to think that ordinary Christians can be content with a shallow prayer that is unable to fill their whole life. Especially in the face of the many trials to which today's world subjects faith, they would be not only mediocre Christians but "Christians at risk". It is therefore essential that education in prayer should become in some way a key-point of all pastoral planning. (NMI, 34)