



EVANGELIZING

New Vision - New Directions

CATECHESIS

A SERIES OF ARTICLES ON THEMES FROM THE GENERAL DIRECTORY FOR CATECHESIS

*"Catechesis is nothing other than the process of transmitting the Gospel, as the Christian community has received it, understands it, celebrates it, lives it and communicates it in many ways."
(GDC, #105)*

*"The definitive aim of catechesis is to put people not only in touch, but also in communion and intimacy, with Jesus Christ."
(CT5) All evangelizing activity is understood as promoting communion with Jesus Christ."
(GDC, #80)*

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NATIONAL CONFERENCE FOR CATECHETICAL LEADERSHIP

Opening Prayer

Take a moment to place yourself in the presence of God's Spirit, then prayerfully read and reflect on the following passage:

"Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, until the end of the age."

(Matthew 28:19-20)

Article 1

Evangelization and the Catechist

by John E. Hurley, C.S.P., D.Min.

Based on paragraphs 46-49 and 58-59 in the *General Directory for Catechesis*

Preparing to Read

In preparing to read the following article, reflect on and discuss with others the following:

1. What does the word evangelization mean to you? What are your questions and concerns about evangelization and the ministry of evangelization in the Church today?
2. Reflect on your own journey of conversion. What does it mean to you that conversion is a lifelong journey? What has been the role of the Scriptures in your conversion journey?

"Catechesis, situated in the context of the Church's mission of evangelization and seen as an essential moment of that mission, receives from evangelization a missionary dynamic which deeply enriches it and defines its own identity" (*General Directory for Catechesis*, #59). This challenges catechists to move from education to formation, from informers to authentic witnesses of the Gospel. The *GDC* calls for a paradigm shift in addressing the ministry of catechesis.

In 1974, Pope Paul VI invited the bishops of the world to gather in special assembly to reflect on the Church's evangelizing mission. Since that time, evangelization has been very much at the forefront of the Church's vision and ministries. In 1975, he said in his Apostolic Exhortation *On Evangelization in the Modern World* that "evangelizing is in fact the grace and vocation proper to the Church, her deepest identity. She exists in order to evangelize, that is to say in order to preach and teach. . . ." (*Evangelii Nuntiandi*, #14).

Evangelization is a big word. In 1975 many Catholics were familiar with the word only through TV evangelists. Its use created much anxiety. Today, however, more and more Catholics are taking their vocation seriously and reflecting on their identity as Christians. There is still some anxiety 25 years later. Yet we see a response in disciples actively re-awakening mission in their lives. Work has the potential to be ministry if we renew ourselves and do it because of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. This renewal was referred to by Pope John Paul I in his only formal message to the world: "We wish to remind the entire Church that its first duty is that of evangelization. . . . If all the sons and daughters of the Church would know how to be tireless missionaries of the Gospel, a new flowering of holiness and renewal would spring up."

Pope John Paul II, for more than twenty years, has reminded us that the reason for being Christian is to proclaim the Good News. In all that we do, we must ask ourselves, "Why am I doing what I am doing? Who am I and

what am I called to proclaim?" A catechist's identity is at stake if one is not a missionary of the Gospel. Pope John Paul II said at the very beginning of his papacy that "one who follows the work of evangelization is not above all a professor. He is a messenger. He acts like a man to whom a great mystery has been entrusted and at the same time like one who has personally discovered the greatest treasure, like that hidden in the field in the parable of Matthew" (May 23, 1979).

From the *General Directory for Catechesis*

"The process of evangelization is structured in stages or essential moments: missionary activity directed toward non-believers and those who live in religious indifference; initial catechetical activity for those who choose the Gospel and for those who need to complete or modify their initiation; pastoral activity directed toward the Christian faithful of mature faith in the bosom of the Christian community. These moments, however, are not unique: they may be repeated, if necessary, as they give evangelical nourishment in proportion to the spiritual growth of each person or of the entire community" (#49).

Encountering the living God is a call to holiness and conversion. Catechists call others to experience this holiness of God and conversion. Countless holy men and women who encountered God have gone before us. We must recall these encounters and our own as we journey in life. Within our lives and the life of the community, catechists are called to teach by word and example. They must continually listen to the stories of proclamation in the lives entrusted to their care. These must not be short-lived experiences in people's lives or in the community. This is the difference between short-lived renewal programs and ones that call for evangelizing communities of faith. This is the difference between a catechist as conveyor of information and witness to the Good News. This is the difference between one who sees the ministry of catechist as a way of life rather than just a job or a task to be done.

A catechist must never lose sight of the fact that one's identity is rooted in a call to discipleship. As a disciple, the catechist's very identity is as one who is called to be an evangelizer. The catechist must see his or her life focused on witnessing to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Pope John Paul II continually reminds us that there is no evangelization if we do not proclaim Jesus. But what is this evangelization that each of us is called to as a disciple?

Responding to the efforts of the last three popes, the bishops of the United States approved in November of 1992 *Go and Make Disciples: A National Plan and Strategy for*



Catholic Evangelization in the United States (GMD). This plan and strategy guides us as a Church to remember that our very identity and vocation as a Church is rooted in evangelization. But what is evangelization?

Our bishops have said that "the simplest way to say what evangelization means is to follow Pope Paul VI, whose message *On Evangelization in the Modern World* has inspired so much recent thought and activity. We can rephrase his words by saying that evangelization means bringing the Good News of Jesus into every human situation and seeking to convert individuals and society by the divine power of the Gospel itself. Its essence is the proclamation of salvation in Jesus Christ and the response of a person in faith, both being the work of the Spirit of God" (*GMD*, p. 2). This definition of evangelization provides each of us, as disciples, the very vocation to which each of us is called. The bishops go on to remind us that "evangelization must always be directly connected to the Lord Jesus Christ. "There is no true evangelization if the name, the teaching, the promises, the Kingdom and the mystery of Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of God are not proclaimed" (*GMD*, p. 2). This reality reminds us that all religious education teachers are not necessarily catechists, and all catechists must be witnesses to the life and teachings of Jesus.

Conversion is the heart of evangelization. We must be converted to Jesus Christ, and this conversion must be an ongoing experience. "This is crucial: we must be converted—and we must continue to be converted! We must let the Holy Spirit change our lives! We must respond to Jesus Christ. And we must be open to the transforming power of the Holy Spirit who will continue to convert us as we follow Christ. If our faith is alive, it

will be aroused again and again as we mature as disciples" (*GMD*, p. 2). Are our hearts on fire? Do we have a passion for what we are doing in the name of the Lord Jesus?

It is this very passion or enthusiasm that the bishops address in their first of three goals in their national plan and strategy. "To bring about in all Catholics such an enthusiasm for their faith that, in living their faith in Jesus, they freely share it with others" (*GMD*, p. 7). This enthusiasm is by far the most challenging of the three goals. The challenge with enthusiasm, however, rests in our own conversion experience, our own relationship with Jesus Christ. When was the last time you talked about "your" conversion experience as a Christian? This is the very heart and soul of our vocation as disciples and catechists. When we truly encounter Jesus Christ, our lives are changed forever. Our hearts are on fire! When our hearts are on fire, what do we do? We

share the experience with others and invite them to have the same experience we have.

This leads us to the second goal of *GMD*: "To invite all people in the United States, whatever their social or cultural background, to hear the message of salvation in Jesus Christ so they may come to join us in the fullness of the Catholic faith" (p. 8). Is this too lofty a goal? I don't think so. We must continue to reflect, however, on the core of our conversion and realize the difference Jesus makes in our lives. I am constantly amazed when I listen to the stories of those who want to join the Church or return to active participation in the life of the Church that each of their stories comes down to someone who made a difference in that person's life by extending an invitation to come to "my"

Reflection Questions for Individuals and Groups

Select some of the following questions to help you assimilate your understanding of this article.

1. How has this article challenged your understanding of catechetical ministry and its relationship with evangelization? What questions has it raised?
2. Where do you see ongoing conversion and evangelization in your life and in the lives of those you serve?
3. "Proclamation, witness, teaching, sacraments, love of neighbor: all of these aspects are the means by which the one Gospel is transmitted and they constitute the essential elements of evangelization itself" (*GDC*, #46). In what specific ways are you implementing these elements of an evangelizing catechesis in your parish?
4. What is the role of the Word of God in the various catechetical programs/sessions in your parish? What is the role of the Word of God at the various meetings or gatherings of adults/youth in your parish? Is the Word of God an active part of the mission and purpose of your parish's groups? What might be the impact of "breaking open the Word" with every group that meets in a parish?
5. How do you foster an encounter with God that will lead others to an experience of conversion and a renewal of hearts? What fosters conversion and what hinders conversion?
6. What does it mean to be a disciple of Christ, and how can you, in your ministry, foster a sense of discipleship among adults and children?
7. As a catechetical leader how do you equip and empower active Catholics to exercise their baptismal call to evangelize and to grow in their understanding of the role of evangelization?

church. This is an example of disciples in action. My life is so empowered by the Gospel of Jesus Christ that I cannot keep it to myself, and I freely share it with others in the hope that they, too, will have the same experience that I have had.

Our passionate invitation into the experience of Jesus is done in many ways. People sometimes need to be conditioned to experience the love of Christ. This brings us to goal three of *GMD*: "To foster gospel values in our society, promoting the dignity of the human person, the importance of the family, and the common good of our society, so that our nation may continue to be transformed by the saving power of Jesus Christ" (p. 8). For me, this is discipleship without boundaries. It is the Gospel in action. People want to experience good news in their lives. When one needs food, the experience of dignity in life makes disciples see that these needs are met. Then opportunities become limitless. When these needs are met, people begin to ask us, "Why

did you do it?" And we can say, "When I was hungry, you gave me food. When I was thirsty, you gave me to drink. For whatever you do to the least among you, that you do unto me" (see Matthew 25:31-46).

Encounters with God call for a change of heart. They call us to view the world differently. They call catechists to invite "everyone" entrusted to them to be more open to an encounter with God. Children and those exploring the Catholic Christian faith in the RCIA are invited to explore the possibilities of God being a part of their lives. This happens only when catechists are on fire through their own encounters with God. This requires a personal relationship with Jesus in one's life—a relationship that comes through evangelization.

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Closing Prayer



Good and gracious God, you call us to be your people, echoing your Word and presence through our ordinary lives as we strive to bring about your reign in our world today. We pray that we will continue to recognize and respond to your presence as we go forth to evangelize our world with your good news and promote a new vision and new direction for the catechetical ministry of all people. We ask for your blessing and intimate presence on our ongoing journey of conversion, becoming disciples who will transform the world through proclaiming and living Gospel values. We ask this in your name. Amen.

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For Further Reading

National Conference of Catholic Bishops. *Go and Make Disciples: A National Plan and Strategy for Catholic Evangelization in the United States*. Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference, 1992.

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