



Handing on the Faith: More than Instruction

Thomas H. Groome

The mandate for Christians to hand on their faith to the rising generations originated on a hillside in Galilee some 2,000 years ago. That's where the Risen Christ assembled his little community and sent them to “make disciples of all nations” by teaching faith in him and in what he had taught. Note well that this commission was given to all there present; it's the responsibility of every disciple to share the faith. Jesus promised to be with us always in continuing his mission (see Matthew 28:16-20) and to send “the Spirit of truth” (John 16:13) to guide his community's evangelizing. Yet, it has never been easy and is likely more difficult than ever in our time.

Reasons for the heightened challenge are myriad; sociologically, the commentators gather them under the label of *secularization*. That means the conditions of contemporary Western culture no longer mediate or encourage faith of its people as in previous eras. In fact, our postmodern situation can be inimical to faith and offers what appears to be an attractive alternative, what Charles Taylor calls “exclusive humanism”—exclusive in that it makes no reference to God or the transcendent.

Add to the discouraging sociocultural conditions the sins and scandals that are now all the more evident within the Church itself. Meanwhile, we are beset by deepened divisions and apparent revisions. Just when we thought the renewal of Vatican II was firmly in place, powerful Church leaders are calling for “a reform of the reforms.” The fact that there are some 30 million Americans who identify themselves as “former Catholics” (Pew report, 2009), many having left because Catholicism was no longer meeting their spiritual needs, indicates that the challenges for handing on the faith are unprecedented.

On the other hand, even with Christian faith no longer likely to be imbibed from the surrounding culture, and the failings of the Church more evident than ever, perhaps ours is an ideal time for chosen faith, for faith embraced out of personal conviction, albeit against the tide. And we are surely still capable of creating environments—in home, parish, and community—that can nurture people in Christian identity, though such inculturation now requires more intentionality than in previous eras.

To stimulate imagination, let's review some of Jesus' own approach; beyond teaching him and what he taught, we can also learn from how he went about it. I follow this with a brief historical note; there is still wisdom to be found from the past 2,000 years for catechesis today. I then summarize the best thinking of the Church about how effectively to hand on the faith in our time. All this will explain our selection of essays for this half of *C21 Resources*.

To Teach as Jesus Did

In Mark's Gospel, Jesus launches his public ministry by calling people to respond to the advent of God's reign in him; this requires a total change of mind and heart (*metanoia*) by embracing God's good news (Mark 1:15-16). Becoming a disciple, then, must begin with a profound conversion of life, a fundamental turn to Jesus and to following *the way* that he modeled and made possible toward the reign of God. Indeed, as he made abundantly clear, the realization of God's reign—God's will of fullness of life for all being realized on earth as in heaven—was the defining purpose of Jesus' life and teaching. It should be ours as well.

Note, too, that everything Jesus taught called people to a faith that is deeply integrated with life, a faith that is lived. Nothing Jesus taught was just about faith in himself but also about what he means for us. So, to "I am the light of the world" he adds immediately "Whoever follows me will have the light of life" (John 8: 12). Even as he says, "I am the living bread that came down from heaven," he adds that it is given "for the life of the world" (John 6: 51). Faith in Jesus calls disciples to a lived faith that is life giving for ourselves and for the world. Our efforts to hand it on should aspire to as much.

Note well that Jesus' call to discipleship was always by invitation: "Come, follow me" (e.g. Mk. 1: 16-7); he even respected the freedom of those who chose not to follow (see John 6: 66-7). We do well to do likewise. Then, we can detect in Jesus' public

ministry a pedagogy that constantly invited *from life to faith to (new) life in faith*. So often he would prompt people to stop and reflect upon their everyday lives (sorting fish, planting seeds, tidying the house), only to teach them of God's reign "with authority" (Mark 1: 22), and then invite them to decision to follow his *way*. His *life to faith to life* approach was amply evident in his use of parables and is epitomized in the encounter of the Risen Christ with the two disciples on the road to Emmaus (check out Luke 24:13-35). Likewise, our catechesis must engage people's lives, only to share Christian faith in ways that address their real-life issues, and then gently invite them to "see for themselves" and personally embrace its truths and spiritual wisdom for life.



Brief Historical Note

The Didache, one of the Church's earliest catechetical documents, lays out the breaking point for disciples quite simply; there are "two ways," the way of life as taught by Jesus and the way of death as lived in sin. Christians must make a foundational choice for Jesus and his *way* of life. This initial conversion is the starting point of evangelization. The prior step to being catechized is to be evangelized—to embrace Jesus and his Gospel in one's heart. Then would-be disciples can be formed and informed in Christian identity by catechesis—if already converted at heart to Jesus and God's reign in him.

The conviction that Christian faith begins with such a fundamental option led Clement of Alexandria (150–215) to advise Christian educators that there are three sequential movements to their work. The first is to turn people's hearts toward Jesus, to *persuade* them to embrace him and his *way*; the second is to *form* them in Christian character, in its values and virtues; and the third moment is explicit *instruction* in the beliefs of Christian faith. So, the dynamic began with *transformation* (conversion), to be followed by *formation*, and only then by in-depth *information*.

This sequence was reflected in the ancient catechumenate, now restored as the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA). It began with the *quarentes* or "seekers"; these were people who had been aroused to initial faith in Jesus or at least felt a deep attraction to him and his *way*. Then they could enter into an intense period of Christian formation by the faith community and its sponsors; this could last as long as three years. Only toward the end of the formative process, climaxing during Holy Week, did the catechumens receive some intense instruction in Christian faith. Specifically they were "handed over the symbols" of the Creed and the Lord's Prayer.

We might well wonder, how did Christians encourage initial conversion, given that it did not typically originate from programs of formal instruction? First and foremost, it was stimulated by the witness of Christians who lived their faith—and often died for it. Lived faith is always the most effective means of evangelization—then and now. Such lived faith reflected both personal and social values, the witness of Christians living with joy and hope, and then with compassion and care, especially through the works of mercy for people in need. Note, too, that there is little evidence of specific instruction for children; they came along in the catechumenate with their parents and became transformed, formed, and informed as disciples alongside of their

family through the lived faith of a local Christian community.

Up until the Protestant Reformation, though Christianity established itself as the dominant faith of Europe, we find very little emphasis on didactic instruction—for anyone. Christian faith was realized as a way of life, deeply intertwined with the ordinary and everyday, lived in and imbibed from the surrounding culture. Oh, there were great monastic and later cathedral schools that gave instruction in Christian faith, but even there the emphasis was on embracing the spiritual wisdom of faith more than the doctrinal details. Such monastic catechesis, however, was available only to a small percentage of the population. For the great majority, handing on the faith was largely by osmosis from the culture, the parish, and the family. The only formal catechesis people received was to learn the Creeds, the Lord's Prayer, and the Ten Commandments; the former two were taught simply by reciting them at Mass.

We can say, then, that for the first 1,500 years or so, Christian faith was more caught than taught. And it was caught in the home, in the parish and village, through the witness of other Christians, from doing Christian things like feeding the poor, or practices like going to church, devotion to the saints, and a host of other spiritual practices that reflected and nurtured the faith's truths and values. In other words, it was more by experiences of faith than by instruction that it was handed on.

Come the Reformation era, however, people's precise doctrinal beliefs took on a whole new importance, even some political urgency. Did one believe in seven sacraments or two? This could decide what side to fight on when the wars broke out—as they did. Recognizing this, and faced with the challenge of sharing a totally revised understanding of Christian faith with a peasant people, Martin Luther published his *Small Catechism* in 1529. This easy to memorize question-and-answer review of the Ten Commandments, the Creed, the

Lord's Prayers and the Sacraments, had instant success. It is understandable, then, that Catholics responded in kind.

The Council of Trent (1545–63) commissioned St. Charles Borromeo to write a comprehensive catechism for priests; it was published in 1666 as *The Roman Catechism*. The Pope ordered that it be crafted into a three-year cycle of sermons to be preached in every parish; from then on (until Vatican II), this text of instruction was the primary source for Sunday preaching—instead of the Bible. Then, for children the two most influential Catholic catechisms

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to emerge—in question-and-answer format of easy to memorize doctrinal summaries—were Peter Canisius' *Catholic Catechism* (1559), widely used in Northern Europe, and Robert Bellarmine's *Dottrina Christiana Breve* (1598), favored in southern Europe. Many of the catechisms that followed, including the great national catechisms mandated by Vatican I (e.g., the *Baltimore Catechism* of 1884), were adaptations or combinations from those of Canisius and Bellarmine. For the next 300 years or so, some question-answer catechism would dominate catechesis, with heavy emphasis on doctrinal instruction.

Though the catechism emerged as the primary symbol of catechesis, socialization in faith by the family and parish continued very strong. On the other hand, the catechism tended to change the primary locus and focus of catechesis—from the home and parish to a classroom, from formation to information. This

is not to imply that we don't need thoroughgoing education in Christian faith; the latter is all the more vital in our time if people are to embrace it by choice and conviction. This past does counsel, however, that handing on the faith cannot be achieved simply by instruction; experiences of lived faith that encourage initial conversion are at least as important, if not more so.

Direction for the Present and Future

The contemporary catechetical movement is usually dated from what is called the "Munich Method," which emerged around the beginning of the 20th century. This was the first notable attempt to draw upon the still-young science of pedagogy to enhance the Church's catechetical ministry. Initiated within and quickly spreading from the archdiocese of Munich, Germany, around 1900, it was a significant departure from question-and-answer memorization. Its pedagogical movements were preparation, presentation, explanation, association, and application. It actively engaged students in the teaching/learning dynamic and the very pedagogy encouraged the integration of faith with everyday life.

Throughout the 20th century, various catechetical "movements" emerged, most notably the *kerygmatic* and *experiential*—sometimes mistakenly pitted as alternatives, as if one emphasizes only content and the other only learning from experience. In the aftermath of Vatican II, there was lots of ferment, experimentations, and, one must admit, some confusion in catechetical education. The fresh air from the Council's open window was bound to prompt lots of alternative proposals to replace the catechism approach, still prevailing.

Now the wisdom from the past, and from the experimentation of the pre- and post-Vatican II eras, has been brought together in the *General Directory for Catechesis* (hereafter *GDC*). Issued on August 15, 1997, by the Congregation for the Clergy—the Vatican agency entrusted with



oversight of the Church's catechetical ministry—it represents what is now the official “mind of the Church” on how most effectively to hand on our faith. A very helpful document, the *GDC*: (a) highlights again the centrality of conversion to Jesus as the primary purpose of catechesis; (b) calls for handing on faith in ways to be lived in everyday life; (c) resituates its primary locus within the family, home, and parish; (d) affirms the need for sound education in faith by a pedagogy that encourages the integration of instruction and experience, akin to Jesus' pedagogy of *life to Faith to life*.

(a) *Conversion to Jesus*: The *GDC* situates catechesis within the overarching framework of evangelization, much as the Risen Christ did on that hillside in Galilee. Thus, “Catechesis, distinct from the primary proclamation of the Gospel, promotes and matures initial conversion, educates the convert in the faith, and incorporates him [or her] into Christian community” (#61). Then it repeatedly makes clear that

the central purpose of catechesis is conversion to Jesus and to his *way*. So, catechetical education must “put people in communion and intimacy with Jesus Christ” (#80), and “apprentice” them to Jesus (an oft-repeated term), presenting “Christian faith as the following of his person,” (#41). Note well that such conversion is not a cozy “me and Jesus” buddy feeling but demands “full and sincere adherence to his person and the decision to walk in his footsteps” (#53), albeit taking a lifetime (#56).

(b) *A Whole Faith*: The *GDC* proposes a holistic sense of Christian faith that should shape everything in the lives of disciples. So, Christian faith has “cognitive, experiential, [and] behavioral” aspects (#35); it is to permeate how we make meaning out of life, the quality of our relationships, and the ethic by which we live (#16). Summarizing, the *GDC* echoes the traditional tripod of Christian faith as *lex credendi*, *lex orandi*, and *lex vivendi*. For this reason, though knowledge of the faith is vitally important

(#85), “formation for the Christian life comprises but surpasses mere instruction” (#68).

(c) *Coalition of Family, Parish, School/Program*: The *GDC* places central emphasis on the role of *family*; in fact, “nothing replaces family catechesis” (#178). Yet, instead of putting a didactic role upon parents, the *GDC* emphasizes the Christian ethos of the home. So, family catechesis is “a Christian education more witnessed to than taught, more occasional than systematic, more on-going than structured into periods” (#255). Elaborating around the image of “domestic church”—revived by Vatican II—the family catechizes effectively by reflecting within its life “the different aspects and functions of the life of the entire Church” (#225). In its own way, then, each family is to share its faith around the word of God, practice prayer and worship within the home, give living witness to Christian faith, and perform the works of compassion and justice.

Regarding the *parish*, the *GDC* emphasizes that catechesis must “incorporate people into Christian community, the church” (#65). Conversely, “catechesis is a responsibility of the entire Christian community” and “of every member of the community” (#220). By baptism, then, every Christian person and community has a crucial function in handing on the faith. The whole process must be communal; “the Christian community is the origin, locus and goal of catechesis” (#254). Everything about the life of each parish should be a source of catechesis for its members and for the community as a whole (#221).

(d) *Life to Faith to Life*: The *GDC* encourages catechists to imitate the pedagogy of God and of Jesus. This means using both “human events and words to communicate”—in other words, experiences and instruction (#38). It elaborates that this amounts to: (1) drawing upon people’s own lived experiences as a locus of God’s self-disclosure in their lives; (2) mediating into their lives the word of God through Scripture and Tradition; (3) encouraging them to integrate their lives and Faith into lived and living Christian faith. With this, the *GDC* says “both/and” to kerygmatic and experiential catechesis.

Pedagogically, then, “every dimension of the faith, like the faith itself as a whole, must be rooted in human experience” (#87). In fact, “experience is a necessary medium for exploring and assimilating the truths which constitute the objective content of Revelation” (#152). Catechetical education is most effective as it presents every aspect of the faith tradition “to refer clearly to the fundamental experiences of people’s lives” (#133). So, our catechesis must constantly integrate life and faith toward lived faith.

This brief review explains the rationale for the selection of essays here. While affirming the need for good instruction, they point to the variety of experiences and practices that encourage initial conversion and that dispose people to integrate life and faith as lived faith in the everyday of life.

THOMAS H. GROOME is the chair of the Department of Religious Education and Pastoral Ministry at the School of Theology and Ministry at Boston College.

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Prayer for the Journey

As Jesus sought the quiet of the desert

Teach us to pray.

As Jesus washed the feet of his disciples

Teach us to love.

As Jesus promised Paradise to the thief on the cross

Teach us to hope.

As Jesus called Peter to walk to him across the water

Teach us to believe.

As the child Jesus sat among the elders in the temple

Teach us to seek answers.

As Jesus in the garden opened his mind and heart to God’s will

Teach us to listen.

As Jesus reflected on the Law and the Prophets

Teach us to learn.

As Jesus used parables to reveal the mysteries of the Kingdom

Teach us to teach.

