



Building Cultural Competencies and the Call for a New Evangelization

*by Jesuit Fr. Allan Figueroa Deck, PhD, STD
Associate Professor of Catholic and Latino Studies
Casassa Chair of Catholic Social Values
Loyola Marymount University, Los Angeles*

Framing the Question

One of the most significant changes taking place in the world of catechesis and religious education over the last fifty years is the absolutely central role that competence in culture and intercultural relations plays in the world of catechesis. This is so because the Magisterium places catechesis squarely within the context of the Church's identity and mission to evangelize, which in turn focuses our attention precisely on the engagement of Christian faith with cultures. What are we really doing when we preach and teach in the name of Christ? We are engaging culture and cultures. Culture is *the* target of the Church's evangelizing and catechizing mission, not merely an interesting or optional sidelight that we explore after having thoroughly mastered the content of catechesis and adopted appropriate methodologies. Pope John Paul II followed the lead of the Second Vatican Council, especially *Gaudium et Spes* and

his predecessor Pope Paul VI's landmark pastoral exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi*. He spelled it out in clear terms in his apostolic exhortation *Catechesi Tradendae*: "We can say of catechesis, as well as of evangelization in general, that it is called *to bring the power of the Gospel into the very heart of culture and cultures*. For this purpose, catechesis will seek to know these cultures and their essential components; it will learn their most significant expressions; it will respect their particular values and riches" (*On Catechesis in Our Time* [*Catechesi Tradendae*], no. 53, emphasis added, www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_16101979_catechesi-tradendae_en.html).

One lung, as it were, with which this catechetical vision breathes is the Gospel message itself and, more broadly, the entire Christian revelation as formulated in Sacred Scripture and Tradition. But the other lung is equally important, namely, the engagement of

the content of faith with people and specifically with the core of attitudes and ways of thinking and behaving that constitute culture in its deepest anthropological sense.

The Holy Father's reference to "culture and cultures" in the above quote is telling. He is referring to the fact that catechists are dealing not only with particular ethnic and national cultures, for example, the prevailing U. S. culture (elusive as that might be), the Asian and Pacific Islander, the Native American, the Haitian, the African American, or the Hispanic/Latino cultures, and so forth. Today's catechist, regardless of his or her area of specialization, must be conversant with today's dominant worldwide culture, that is, the culture of modern, secular societies like the United States. The Church's urgent call for a New Evangelization depends on the response of catechists, teachers, and preachers not only to particular ethnic/national cultures, but also to the reality of a pervasive secularizing culture that is the paradigm for U.S. culture and for many others in an economically globalized and interdependent world. The Pew Research Center's recent studies on religious trends in the United States document the precipitous rise in the number of adults—and especially young adults—in the United States claiming to have no religion: 12 percent of adults and 24 percent of youth and young adults (see Pew Research Reports on Religion, pewresearch.org/topics/religion).

In formulating the Church's response to the challenge of secularism, a focus on catechetical literacy is certainly of extreme importance. A great deal of data is telling us that both younger and older generations of U.S.

Catholics are woefully deficient in their ability to give an intelligent account of their faith and, more alarming, live up to its standards of conduct, such as participating in the Sunday Eucharist on a weekly basis and appropriating a consistent ethic of life on the issues of contraception, abortion, Christian marriage, immigration, capital punishment, and economic justice. The response to this challenge, however, should not be limited to merely proclaiming what the Church teaches and providing greater access to the formulations of the faith. While zealous proclamation of the faith is always fundamental and access to rich resources like the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* and other handy aids adapted to adults or youth are essential, they are simply not enough. Perhaps Pope Benedict XVI was referring to this in his first encyclical, *Spe Salvi*, when he wrote: "We have raised the question: can our encounter with the God who in Christ has shown us his face and opened his heart, be for us too not just 'informative' but 'performative'—that is to say, can it change our lives, so that we know we are redeemed through the hope that it expresses?" (*On Christian Hope [Spe Salvi]*, no. 4, www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20071130_spe-salvi_en.html).

The Holy Father's distinction between passing on information and the heavy lifting leading to that information really making a difference in how one concretely lives (the performative) directly relates to the central point of this essay: familiarity with culture and how it works together with knowledge, attitudes, and practical skills in intercultural encounters goes a long way toward bridging the gap between

catechesis as centered on content on the one hand and as leading to transformed lives on the other—that is, effecting an ongoing Christian conversion. Another way to say this is to remind ourselves that doctrinal soundness is never enough. Our mission is to make the sacred Revelation, the Christian message, become life. That is the heart of the matter! The Church today tells us that knowing practically how to engage culture and cultures is the key.

Building Intercultural Competence for Catechists

At their November 2011 meeting in Baltimore, the Committee on Cultural Diversity of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) approved five guidelines for intercultural competence in ministry. They are quite relevant specifically to the catechetical ministry as understood in light of the Magisterium today:

1. Frame issues of diversity theologically in terms of the Church's identity and mission to evangelize.
2. Seek an understanding of culture and how it works.
3. Develop intercultural communication skills in pastoral settings.
4. Expand one's knowledge of the obstacles which impede effective intercultural relations.
5. Foster ecclesial integration rather than assimilation in Church settings, with a spirituality of reconciliation and mission. (Go to www.usccb.org/media/video; click on the Diversity/Diversidad tab; select video "Building

Intercultural Competence for Ministers.")

These guidelines are not only relevant for every ecclesial ministry in light of the Magisterium's insistence on the centrality of culture and cultures as the target of all the Church's efforts to teach and preach, but they are also urgently needed in light of the practicalities of what is happening on the ground in the United States today. Dramatic demographic shifts affecting the Church in the United States—in parishes, schools, and Catholic organizations and institutions—make cultural and intercultural proficiency a *sine qua non* for heads-up, feet-on-the-ground catechesis. What militates against the development of this expertise among today's catechists is the indifference and even resistance of many European American Catholics, and others as well, to taking a long, hard look at *their own culture*. Many Americans have little or no critical sense of the deeper values, positive or negative, of the prevailing U.S. culture. Yet to become effective, discerning evangelizers and catechists, they must begin to develop this kind of awareness. This is fundamental.

The Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA) at Georgetown University reports that fully one-third of parishes in the United States are "shared"; that is, they are made up of two or more language and cultural groups. Moreover, the reality of parish closures and clustering, at least in certain parts of the country, together with presbyterates and cohorts of parish/diocesan leaders that are rapidly becoming non-European in the majority creates a situation on the ground that seriously stretches bishops, priests, deacons, religious and lay ecclesial

leaders, and especially catechists (see CARA Reports, cara.georgetown.edu/index.html).

In their curriculum for intercultural competence, the bishops stress the theological underpinning of catholicity, the Church's universality, and an ecclesiology of communion and participation that values unity in diversity or difference. This puts the stress on the ability to respect legitimate differences and exercise pastoral care in a way that does not impose a one-size-fits-all approach to working in diverse community settings.

The USCCB's Committee on Cultural Diversity has produced a curriculum consisting of five modules, one for each of the five guidelines on intercultural competence. The purpose of the modules is to bring ecclesial ministers, including catechists, to a basic level of familiarity with cultural and intercultural relations and communications, that is, with attitudes, knowledge, and skills that will allow them to interact with the growing diversity of groups in today's parish, school, and organizational contexts.

In connection with this, it is necessary to note that one of the characteristic changes taking place in many ecclesial contexts today involves not only the encounter with particular, discrete cultures but also with interculturality itself. In many church, school, and organizational settings it is not just a matter of relating to one or two "outsider" cultural groups, but of engaging and serving a bewildering combination of diverse groups. Fifty years ago the Church had an enormously successful system of national parishes that divided the diverse communities into their own respective bailiwicks. In the second part

of the twentieth century, an immigrant Catholic Church experienced a process of assimilation to the U.S. mainstream that was successfully carried out, especially in the creation of booming suburban parishes made up of the second and third generations of European Catholic immigrants. They had stopped speaking the languages of their ancestors and had become quite assimilated.

But something is not right about this assimilation because, in retrospect, we see that it came about at a very heavy price, namely, the virtual disappearance of a "bottom line" for Catholicism in the United States: the disappearance of a deeper sense of what it means to be American and Catholic. Another way to express this idea is to say that the catechesis broke down and failed to successfully make the connection between information (the content of faith) and performance (behavior), and between belonging to the Church and believing what it teaches. In stressing the issue of the New Evangelization and how the faith is *transmitted*, the *Lineamenta* of the upcoming 2012 Synod of Bishops points to the need for cultural discernment. The preparatory document puts it this way: "In a word, the situation is requiring the Church to consider, in an entirely new way, how she proclaims and transmits the faith," and explicitly refers us to two documents of the Magisterium as especially responding to the challenge of engaging in the urgently needed process of cultural discernment: *Evangelii Nuntiandi* and *Catechesi Tradendae* (see Synod of Bishops, XIII Ordinary General Assembly, *The New Evangelization for the Transmission of the Christian Faith*, *Lineamenta*, no. 3, www.vatican.va/roman_curia/synod/doc

[uments/rc_synod_doc_20110202_lineamenta-xiii-assembly_en.html](#)).

Conclusion

By stressing challenges around the process of transmission of the faith, the coming Synod of Bishops will reinforce the Magisterium's focus on cultural and intercultural competencies. At the core of what is involved in those competencies is a sense of what makes both particular cultures and the paradigmatic modern, secular culture work. A range of attitudes exists toward how a person and a community are supposed to live, and many distinctive values are honored more or less by the diversity of cultures. How do the Gospel and Church teaching square with the variety of cultural approaches that meet and clash in today's world? What are the practical ways in which a catechist can find hooks for grabbing on to the array of cultures found among our youngest and oldest parishioners today? How do rituals, symbols, and narratives at the heart of discrete cultures, as well as at the heart of the prevailing secular culture, move and motivate people? What are the new and appropriate methods and expressions for religious formation today? How can the Christian message transform these cultures for the sake of the Gospel?

This essay follows the lead of the USCCB's Committee on Cultural Diversity in suggesting that the answer to these critical questions begins with insight into the central role of cultural proficiency. Building capacity for cultural and intercultural proficiency and competence is the most strategic step ecclesial ministers can take today to respond intelligently to their challenges and to what the parish, school, and organizational realities on the ground are telling us. Effectively responding to Pope Benedict XVI's call for a New Evangelization must begin here with the *capacity for cultural and intercultural discernment*, the ability to engage one's own culture as well as modern, secular culture and myriad other cultures with the Gospel. This is the critical burden and great promise for the disciples of Jesus Christ, especially for Christian teachers, catechists, and preachers today.

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Synod of Bishops, *XIII Ordinary General Assembly, The New Evangelization for the Transmission of the Christian Faith, Lineamenta*.

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