

Incarnational Catechesis: Bringing Faith to Life beyond Textbooks

Joyce Donahue

At Christmas, the Word becomes flesh. The baby in the manger is tangible: the man he becomes, memorable. Two thousand years after Jesus ceased to have a physical presence on earth, there are still those who risk their lives to proclaim him. Jesus is no mere theological concept, but a living being who once came to earth to call us to relationship with the Father through him, in the Spirit. People rooted in this relationship cannot stop sharing the Good News.

Young Christians start developing a relationship with God most effectively not through studying catechetical textbooks (which assume they have already begun that relationship) but by experiencing how faith is lived. They should see this in parents, catechists and others whose lives, hopes and actions are those of disciples on the journey of living faith in Jesus Christ. The “symphony of faith” found in the Catechism (*General Directory for Catechesis*, 136) does not operate independent of human agency, like the ancient “music of the spheres,” but requires faith-filled catechists skilled in communicating with young people. Faith divorced from witnesses who profess it, removed from the lips of disciples, sanitized of their stories and turned into mere intellectual assent to truth disembodies the message that God is alive and active in the world. Such methodology implies that truth is distant and holiness only possible if we insulate ourselves from the world. Young people today will disregard that message.

“Divine Pedagogy” (*General Directory for Catechesis*, 143) in which God reveals himself gradually through the culture and situation of the person, takes place through the medium of the senses and requires methods that “demonstrate respect for those to whom catechesis is addressed.” (148) All of this “is rooted in interpersonal relations and makes its own the process of dialogue (143.)

Catechists, parents and the community ideally conduct that dialogue with young people and provide them the same “apprenticeship of the entire Christian life” given to catechumens during the RCIA (GDC, 67.) Children/teens learn how to live as Catholics by being exposed to the witness of others who live as Catholics. They must come to know that the Church exists to nurture their relationship with God and to prepare them to share it.

Frustrated by the disappearance of so many youths after Confirmation, some assume the cure is to teach more doctrine. Some pastors in our diocese have mandated “more traditional” textbooks in hopes of stemming the tide of departing young people. However, when teaching of faith concepts is isolated from the experience and culture of the learner it is just as ineffective as any other book-based catechesis that lacks living witness.

Young learners need first to develop a living relationship with Christ, otherwise we are not giving them a hook on which to hang the doctrine. Doctrine, fundamentally, exists to support, clarify and help us understand the nature of the truth we profess. It never serves as a substitute for faith.

Doctrine may be memorized, but it must be connected to the life of Christ incarnated in a Eucharistic community to make sense. If young people complete their initiation and catechesis without this happening, they will, at the most remain cultural Catholics, not disciples. More likely, they walk away with the impression that Catholic faith is not a 24-7 lifestyle, but a series of vaguely connected beliefs and rules to be followed, and these beliefs/practices have no connection to a relationship with God or relevance to real life.

All of this is in no way to denigrate the importance of good catechetical textbooks based on the Catechism. We certainly appreciate the efforts by publishers to assist catechists to provide good catechesis. However, the best way to pass on a lifelong faith to young people is to activate their catechists as living witnesses and their families and community as context for the textbook. We sell young people short when we present catechesis only as a school-style program consisting of students, teachers, classrooms, and books. The result is that it can look as if faith is a course of study, not a lifestyle. Natural result: Confirmation looks like graduation.

While catechists are certainly people of good will, too often they are not intentional disciples with a full, living relationship with Christ. Hence, they rely heavily on their textbooks. We need parish leaders wise enough to recruit those who are already disciples to be the community's catechists. We need leaders qualified to give catechists the skills and resources (including access to technology) to bring catechesis home to young people, rooting it in personal experience, the community and culture.

Well-formed catechists are vital to parish catechesis; they go beyond the textbook. They connect Scripture and Church teaching to life, making faith real through story, action and example. Once young people grasp how a faith concept is experienced and lived and observe it in the lives of the adults around them, catechists can use the textbook to show how Church teaching supports the faith concept. Only if the first process takes place will the second one make sense to young people.

This article was originally published in Ministry & Liturgy, October 2015, Vol. 42.8