Commentary on the General Directory for Catechesis Raymond L. Burke, D.D., J.C.D

Saint Paul, the Apostle of the Nations, reminds us: “Faith, then, comes through hearing, and what is heard is the word of Christ” (Rom 10:17). His simple words remind us of the fundamental responsibility of the Church to hand on by teaching the doctrine and practice of the faith. Our children and young people look to the older generation to hand on to them — as a gift — the faith which the older generation first received as a gift from God through parents and grandparents. Among the older generation itself, there is the strong desire to be able to give a better account of our faith, so that we may live more fully what we believe and be more effective witnesses for those who seek God’s truth and love found in the Catholic faith.

On August II, 1997, Pope John Paul II approved for publication the General Directory for Catechesis as the norm and instrument for the church in fulfilling her fundamental responsibility of teaching the faith. The Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, in its Decree on the Pastoral Office of Bishops in the Church, mandated the development and publication of a practical guide which would set forth the fundamental principles and the organization of the Church’s catechetical mission on behalf of children, young people and adults. In 1971, in response to the Council’s mandate, Pope Paul VI ordered the publication of the General Catechetical Directory, which set forth the norm for both the content and the method of handing on the Catholic faith through catechesis.

In the years since the closing of the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, there has been intense activity in catechesis. The intensity of the church’s concern for catechesis is perhaps best seen in the call for a universal catechism at the 1985 Extraordinary Synod of Bishops and the publication of the Catechism of the Catholic Church by Pope John Paul II on October 11, 1992. It is also seen in the publication of two important apostolic exhortations: Evangelization in the Modern World (December 8, 1975) of Pope Paul VI and Catechesis in Our Time (October 16, 1979) of Pope John Paul II. The pontificate of our present Holy Father is marked above all by an extraordinary richness in the presentation of the doctrine of the faith and in the call for a more generous living of the faith in practice. All of the significant efforts of the Church over the past thirty and more years to better communicate the doctrine of the faith through catechesis have made it necessary to issue a new directory for catechesis which would be a worthy successor to the General Catechetical Directory of 1971.

Commenting on the developments in catechesis over the time since the closing of the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, the General Directory for Catechesis rightly observes: “The course of catechesis ... has been characterized everywhere by generous dedication, worthy initiatives and by positive results for the education and growth in the faith of children, young people and adults.” It further and correctly notes: “At the same time, however, there have been crises, doctrinal inadequacies, influences from the evolution of global culture and ecclesial questions derived from outside the field of catechesis which have often impoverished its quality.” (No. 2) The need to confirm the recent progress made in the Church’s catechetical activity and to remedy the deficiencies in carrying out the Church’s fundamental responsibility of catechesis makes the latest revision of the directory for catechesis most timely.
What is the purpose of the General Directory for Catechesis and for whom is it intended? The General Directory sets forth the principles which are the foundation for the sound teaching of the faith. Only if these principles are understood and applied will the Church meet the challenge of catechesis in our time and overcome the significant difficulties which have been encountered in catechesis over the past decades. To be more specific, the General Directory sets forth both the nature of catechesis within the Church’s mission of evangelization, that is the mission of announcing the Gospel of our salvation to the world, and the content of catechesis as contained in the Catechism of the Catholic Church.

The General Directory for Catechesis is directed, above all to the bishops of the Church who are the first catechists and bear the primary responsibility for carrying out the apostolate of catechetics. However, many others in the Church share with the Bishop the responsibility to provide sound catechesis. Therefore, the General Directory for Catechesis states regarding its own intended readership: “Clearly it will be of use in forming those preparing for ordination to the Priesthood, in the continuing formation of priests and in the formation of catechists” (No. 11). In the sense that every adult member of the Church is called to give an account of his or her faith before the world, the General Directory for Catechesis is directed to the whole Church. It is important for all of us in the Church to know the fundamental principles which are to direct the work of teaching the faith and to know the basic truths and virtues to be communicated through that teaching. Because it is addressed to the bishops, priests, catechists and all the faithful, the General Directory for Catechesis has as an immediate goal the preparation of catechetical directories and catechisms for each portion of the church, the local diocese and groups of dioceses working together, perhaps through the local Conference of Bishops. The revised directory is a treasury of practical helps for the drawing up of local directories and catechisms which are complete and sound both in content and in methodology.

Over the next weeks, I wish to open up for all of us in the Diocese of La Crosse the mind of the church regarding our responsibility to teach the faith as it is set forth so thoroughly and well in the General Directory for Catechesis. In my next reflection, I will take up the introductory part of the document entitled, “Preaching the Gospel in the Contemporary World.”

Teaching the Faith in Today’s World

In the Parable of the Sower and the Seed, Our Lord Jesus Christ teaches us both the power of the seed (the Word of God) to produce its fruit (salvation) and the importance of the soil (individuals of every time and place) into which the seed is received in order that the seed realize its full potential. Reflecting upon the history of the church up to our day, we can only wonder at all that the teaching of God’s Word over the Christian centuries has accomplished for the glory of God and the salvation of His holy people. It is clear that “Jesus Christ, present in the church through his Spirit, continues to scatter the word of the Father ever more widely in the field of the world” (General Directory for Catechesis, No. 15). The teaching of the Gospel has fostered and continues to foster the growth of a “civilization of love” in our world. However, catechesis can only achieve its end when the Gospel is received into hearts disposed to hear God’s Word and to put it into practice in daily living.
The Introduction of the General Directory for Catechesis rightly stresses the importance of our view of the world in carrying out the apostolate of catechetics. Our view of the world very much influences how we receive the teaching of the faith. If we understand well the world as God has created it and redeemed it, then our own hearts will be well disposed and we will help others to be so disposed to hear God’s Word as it comes to us in the Holy Scriptures and Tradition. Not only is it important for catechists to reflect upon their view of the world in order best to carry out their apostolate which is fundamental to the life of the Church, but it is also important to help the catechized to reflect upon their world view in order to dispose their minds and hearts to the truth and love of God communicated through catechesis.

The General Directory for Catechesis reminds us that there are three essential elements to the Christian view of the world:

The Christian knows that every human event — indeed all reality — is marked by the creative activity of God which communicates goodness to all beings; the power of sin which limits and numbs man; and the dynamism which bursts forth from the Resurrection of Christ ... (No. 16).

In every moment of catechesis, it is important to keep in mind the three essential elements of the truth about our world: 1) that it comes from God and, therefore, is good; 2) that the goodness of the world has been marred by man’s sin, the original sin of our first parents and actual sins committed by us; and 3) that Christ’s risen life is given to us in the Church to overcome the evil of sin in our lives and to prepare day by day the final coming of Christ when all things will be restored to the goodness with which God the Father called them into being.

Above all, the Church’s view of the world in carrying out the apostolate of catechesis aims to foster a just order which is the foundation of peace in the world and the preparation of the “new heavens and new earth” (cf. Rev. 21:1). The work of catechesis naturally inspires the catechist and the catechized to respond to the grace of the resurrection by working for justice, especially on behalf of those in most need. Our Holy Father refers to this fundamental Christian inspiration as the “preferential option or love for the poor.”

The Church’s concern to foster a just order in our personal lives and in our society and world leads her to give primacy of place to the promotion of the respect for the dignity of the human person and the protection of human rights (the right to life, work, education, the foundation of a family, participation in public life and religious liberty), which enable man and woman to carry out their responsibilities in the world as sons and daughters of God, brothers and sisters of the only Son of God. The Church’s concern for the human person and human rights is truly Catholic in the sense that it takes into account all of the essential dimensions of human life, including the cultural and religious dimensions. “What interests the Church is above all the integral development of the human person and of all peoples” (General Directory for Catechesis, No. 18). A central message of the Church’s catechesis, when carried out with attention to the Church’s view of the world, is the revelation of “the inviolable dignity of every human person.”

It is critical that the popular view of the world be confronted with the Church’s view in order that the Word of God be effectively communicated. The Church searches out what is good in contemporary culture, what will assist the handing-on and the receiving of the Word of God. At the same time, she must identify honestly the aspects of our culture which work against the teaching and the hearing of God’s Word.
Among the cultural elements which favor and hinder the handing-on of God’s Word, the General Directory for Catechesis notes several religious and moral factors. Religiously, there is a clear attraction to sacred things in our society and culture. The attraction to the sacred is positive for the handing-on of the faith, but it can be manipulated and misguided by sects and false religious movements, e.g. religious fundamentalism and the so-called New Age spirituality. All the more reason to provide a sound catechesis which responds to our culture’s desire for the sacred with the truth of God’s Word as it is taught in the church. The religious factors which hinder catechesis are: 1) “a persistent spread of religious indifference” (No. 22), by which we fail to see or we simply ignore the hand of God at work in all of creation and in every human act; and, worse yet, 2) the denial of God’s existence altogether or atheism. As the General Directory points out, the denial of God is often implicit in an explicit secularism by which we believe that the world is understandable without reference to its origin and destiny in God.

In the moral field, our culture is marked by confusion regarding the truth about the human person and human freedom. just as religious indifferentism blinds man to the truth about God’s relationship to all of reality, so moral relativism blinds us to God’s law, especially in social and political aspects of our life, which frees us to act in truth and love.

The Introduction of the General Directory for Catechesis continues with a reflection on: 1) how today’s culture influences the faith of Catholics and the life of the Church; and 2) the resulting strong points and weaknesses in carrying out the apostolate of catechesis.

**Strengths and Weaknesses of Our Catechesis**

Before entering the discussion of the Part One of the General Directory for Catechesis, I conclude the presentation of the Introduction by looking at the effects of the relationship of the Church with the world and of the relationships within the Church on the handing-on of the faith through current programs of catechesis.

**The Church In Relationship with The World**

The General Directory aptly points out that Christians as a leaven in the world are not immune from the influence of the world in the handing-on of the faith. On a positive note, the catechesis of children, young people and adults in our time has fostered in Christians the experience of the richness of mercy of God the Father, the renewed knowledge of the mystery of the Incarnation or the divinity and humanity of Our Lord Jesus Christ, the consciousness of the responsibility we all have for the mission of the church, and a heightened consciousness of social justice as constitutive of our Catholic Faith (No. 24).

On the other hand, the secularism and moral relativism pervasive in our culture have also had their negative effect on catechesis. There is a large group of non-practicing Catholics who still have some sense of belonging to the church but who need to be reawakened to understand the Catholic faith and to practice it. There are also a number of members of the Church who are sincerely religious but who lack knowledge of the foundations of their faith. There are others who have not developed their understanding of the faith from what the understanding they had achieved as children and who, therefore, need to understand their faith now from the perspective of adult life in the world. Finally, there are Catholics who, either because of their desire “to
promote dialogue with various cultures and other religious confessions” or because of “a certain reticence on their part to live in contemporary society as believers,” fail to give a strong witness to faith in Our Lord Jesus Christ alive for us in the Church. The only way to overcome the negative effects of our culture on Christian life and, therefore, on catechesis is through a new evangelization, a renewed presentation of the faith and of its practice for children, young people and adults (Nos. 25-26).

**Relationships within the Church**

Clearly, relationships within the Church also have a profound effect on catechesis. The internal life of the church today may best be considered from the perspective of the reception of the teaching of the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, especially as it is found in the four most critical documents: the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*), the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (*Lumen gentium*), the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation (*Dei Verbum*) and the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (*Gaudium et spes*).

Positive results of the reception of the Council’s teaching may be seen in the understanding of the sacred liturgy as the “source and summit” of our life in the Church, in the “keener awareness” of the common priesthood of the baptized and of the consequent universal call to holiness, in the renewed appreciation of the Sacred Scriptures, and in the greater openness of Catholics to the mission of the Church which includes the evangelization of the world (No. 27).

But the Council’s teaching has not always been received with positive effect. The negative impact of the Council is usually owed to the failure to study seriously its teaching in the context of the perennial teaching and practice of the Church. Since the Council, there is noted for example, the tendency to view the Church as an institution apart from the mystery of Christ alive within her through the Indwelling of the Holy Spirit. Some have manipulated the teaching of the Council to advance their own agenda, without respect for the integrity of the teaching, and thus have created serious divisions within the church. The frequent characterization of members of the Church as “liberal” or “conservative” is a manifestation of this negative effect. Divisions within the Church harm evangelization, hindering the Church from presenting herself as she truly is, the communion of her members with God — Father, Son and Holy Spirit — and with each other as true sons and daughters of God in God the Son Incarnate (No. 28).

**Vitality of Catechesis and Difficulties in Catechesis**

The examination of the influence exercised on catechesis by the relationship of the Church with the world and the relationships within the Church herself permits the General Directory to profile the vitality and the difficulties of catechesis today. The General Directory notes a number of signs of vitality in contemporary catechesis:

- the devotion of many priests, consecrated persons and laity to the work of catechesis as fundamental to Church life;
- the “missionary character of contemporary catechesis,” which has brought so many of the unbaptized and the uncatechized into the Church;
the central place which catechesis, especially of adults, has in the pastoral planning of
dioeceses and in the work of associations and movements within the Church;

improvement in the quality, in general, and in the depth of catechesis, especially
recently (No. 29). The Directory also notes difficulties in catechesis in our time
which must be addressed:

the need for catechists to understand catechesis as “a school of faith,” that is a
deepening of Christian life in all of its aspects: knowledge, prayer and worship, and
witness;

the need to base catechesis on the Holy Scriptures and Tradition, that is the need in
catechesis to make “sufficient reference to the church’s long experience and
reflection” over the course of nearly two thousand years;

the need to keep before our eyes the object of catechesis, communion with Our
Lord Jesus Christ, and, therefore, to present the Catholic faith in its entirety,
especially the entire truth of the mystery of Christ;

the need to address the lack of presentation of certain essential truths of the faith,
for example, the truth about the relationship of God and man, the truth about sin
and grace, the truth about the Final Things; the serious need to make sure that
catechisms and textbooks are not selective in their presentation of the Catholic faith,
eroding the integrity of the understanding of the faith;

the need to have a strong and full “link with the liturgy,” making liturgical symbols
and rites, prayers and gestures, integral to the presentation of the faith;

the need to overcome a false tension between method and content in catechesis and
to found the teaching of the faith in a method which respects the fullness of the
doctrine of the faith;

the need to present the faith within a particular culture so that it is seen as truly
“Good News for the lives of people and of society;”

and the need to take up formation for the apostolate and for the missions as an
essential task of catechesis (No. 30).

Reading the Signs of the Times

To read accurately God’s will in our times and culture, the Church must view the situations in
which she finds herself “within the perspective of the history of salvation.” As the Directory for
Catechesis points out, the Church’s reading of the signs of the times always leads her to a renewed
understanding of “the need for mission.” The Directory stresses the following challenges and
directions for catechesis in our time:

1. it must be at the service of the evangelization of the Church, with a clear accent on the
missions;
2. it must be addressed to children, young people and adults;
3. it must direct itself to the formation of the Christian life of the catechized;
4. it must present the essential truths of the faith, emphasizing “life in Christ as the center of
the life of faith;” and
5. it must see as “its primary task the preparation and formation of catechists in the deep
riches of the faith” (Nos. 31-33).
Overview of the General Directory for Catechesis

The General Directory for Catechesis is divided into five parts.

- Part One is entitled “Catechesis in the Church’s mission of evangelization.” It describes the proper character of catechesis within the Church’s entire ministry of teaching the Word of God. Having a correct understanding of catechesis is essential, for the way one understands the work of catechesis will very much determine how he or she carries it out.
- Part Two, “The Gospel Message,” presents the content of the faith which is taught through catechesis. It describes both the source of catechesis in the Word of God, contained in Sacred Tradition and in Sacred Scripture, and the criteria for presenting the Word of God in catechesis. It also describes the content of catechesis as it has most recently been authoritatively set forth in the Catechism of the Catholic Church promulgated by Pope John Paul II on October 11, 1992.
- Part Three discusses catechesis as first and foremost a work of the Holy Spirit and then examines the different methods used in catechesis.
- Part Four is devoted to the diversity of persons to whom catechesis is directed, a diversity of age, of development in the faith and the life of faith, of special circumstances of life, and of cultural contexts.
- Finally, Part Five presents the important aspects of catechesis in the particular Church, for instance in a diocese like ours. It takes up: 1) the responsibility of bishops, priests, deacons, religious and lay faithful; 2) the formation of catechists; 3) the places in which catechesis is carried out; and 4) the practical aspects of organizing catechesis.

Now that we have surveyed the whole presentation in the General Directory, we can begin to look carefully at each part.

Part One discusses the initiative of God which is at the foundation of catechesis. There would be no teaching of the word of God, if God did not first reveal Himself to us. For the fullest understanding of Part One, the study of the teaching of the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council contained in the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation is essential.

Divine Revelation is God’s personal communication of Himself to us. God reveals Himself to us in His creation of all things and in His keeping of created things in being. When we reflect on the deepest nature of things, we can arrive at a certain knowledge of God as the source and destiny of all things. Already in creation, God manifested His desire to be in communication with us, giving us alone, among His earthly creatures, the capacity to know Him and to love Him.

God the Father fulfilled most perfectly His desire to have communion with us by sending His Son in our human nature through the power of the Holy Spirit. In other words, God desired that we share as fully as possible in His life. He brought to realization His desire by sending His Son into the world as a Brother to all His children, to all those whom He created in His own image and likeness.
We call salvation history the gradual realization of God’s plan to adopt us as His sons and daughters in His only-begotten Son. God revealed Himself and His saving love for us in time and space, through deeds and words, events and the divinely inspired words which interpret those events for us. The Dogmatic Constitution on the Divine Revelation of Second Vatican Ecumenical Council made it so clear for us that the Father’s saving deeds and words are inseparable from one another: “As a result, the works performed by God in the history of salvation show forth and bear out the doctrine and realities signified by the words; the words, for their part, proclaim the works, and bring to light the mystery they contain” (No. 2).

It is impossible to know God as He desires to reveal Himself to us apart from a knowledge of salvation history.

The manner of God’s revelation of Himself to us is the manner of our proclamation of His saving love, what we call evangelization. Evangelization must therefore be both deed and word, witness to God’s life in us and announcement of God’s life given to us in the Church. Catechesis, within the whole work of evangelization, primarily hands on the deeds and words of Divine Revelation. Clearly, catechesis presents Divine Revelation not just in its historical aspect, the saving deeds and words of God in the past, but in its actuality, God’s saving plan as it continues to be realized in the life of the catechized (cf. General Directory for Catechesis, No. 39).

Our Lord Jesus Christ, the fullness of the revelation of God the Father, must be the center of all catechesis, and the Gospels which interpret the saving deeds and words of Our Lord Jesus must be the constant point of reference in catechesis.

It is common knowledge that among all the inspired writings, even among those of the New Testament, the Gospels have a special place, and rightly so, because they are our principal source for the life and teaching of the Incarnate Word, our Savior. (Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, No. 18)

Catechesis which does not communicate a deep knowledge and love of the Savior is not catechesis, the handing-on of divine revelation.

The Church, the Body of Christ, was called into being by the Savior to bring His saving deeds and words to all peoples of all times and places. The Church came to birth through the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at the Resurrection of Our Lord Jesus. She is founded upon the Apostles whom the Savior gave the Holy Spirit for the preaching of the Gospel to all the nations.

“The Apostles, by words, deeds and writings, faithfully discharged this task” (General Directory for Catechesis, No. 43). The responsibility of safeguarding and handing-on the doctrine of the Apostolic faith and the integrity of its practice belongs to every member of the Church. The Savior so equipped the Church that she faithfully keeps and transmits the Apostolic Tradition:

The Gospel is conserved whole and entire in the Church: the disciples of Jesus Christ contemplate it and meditate upon it unceasingly; they live it out in their everyday lives; they proclaim it in their missionary activity. (Ibid.)
The authenticity of the conservation and transmission of Divine Revelation, the Word of God contained in Tradition and Scripture, is guaranteed. The Magisterium or teaching office of the Church, by the grace of the Holy Spirit, serves the whole church in the authentic interpretation of the Word of God.

But the task of giving an authentic interpretation of the Word of God, whether in its written form or in the form of Tradition, has been entrusted to the living teaching office of the Church alone. Its authority in this matter is exercised in the name of Jesus Christ. Yet this Magisterium is not superior to the Word of God, but is its servant. It teaches only what has been handed on to it. At the divine command and with the help of the Holy Spirit, it listens to this devotedly, guards it with dedication and expounds it faithfully. All that it proposes for belief as being divinely revealed is drawn from this single deposit of faith. (Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, No. 10)

The Church is rightly called the “universal sacrament of salvation,” for she transmits Divine Revelation through evangelization. Through evangelization, she both teaches God’s plan for our salvation and communicates the grace of salvation through the administration of the Sacraments.

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