

Theological Ministry

The call of a Catechist

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CGS-T524GS14: Integrative Seminar
Mar. 18. 2017

On Nov 27, 2015 Pope Francis spoke to catechists and teachers in Uganda with the following encouraging statement: ““Teacher!’ What a beautiful name this is! Jesus is our first and greatest teacher. Saint Paul tells us that Jesus gave his Church not only apostles and pastors, but also teachers, to build up the whole body in faith and love...., you, as catechists, play an outstanding part in bringing the Good News to every village and homestead in your country.”¹ This heartfelt statement legitimately communicates to all catechists worldwide encouraging their spirits as they engage in unknown adventures and often unreceptive ministries. Thank God for Uganda, a third world country, which God already blessed with many zealous catechists to spread his message of love and salvation. Nonetheless, many countries are still in need of priests, religious brothers and sisters, and catechists. Who will God’s messengers there when God calls? If they are called, what would they do to fulfill the task that is entrusted to them? **Catechists should hold dear to their hearts three inseparable principles as they answer the call to the humble work as a servant of God: *praying, preparing, and celebrating.***

Praying is the first and priority activity of a catechist. Pope Francis writes: “Being a catechist is not a title: it is an attitude of abiding with him, and it lasts for a lifetime! It means abiding in the Lord’s presence and letting ourselves be led by him.”² Yes, in prayer one allows oneself to be in the presence of God and let God be present to him/her. The act of prayer itself is first initiated by God, not by the human person, as Jesus invited his disciples, “I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing” (John 15:5). In prayer one gradually builds up a relationship with God, gets to

¹ “Pope Francis, Address to Catechists, Teachers in Uganda,” accessed March 7, 2017. <https://zenit.org/articles/full-text-pope-s-address-to-catechists-teachers-in-uganda/>

² Pope Francis, *The Church of Mercy* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd Ltd, 2014), 15.

know God and God's instruction. This capacity of listening is similar to that of a prophet as Sofia Cavalletti describes: "The prophet is characterized by the particular capacity to listen to God. If the prophet can be identified as a *voice* – the voice of God in the midst of people – it is because he has first been an *ear*, straining to listen to what God has made known to him."³ In a similar way, the catechist can hardly listen to God's instruction if he/she refuses to sit at God's feet in prayer - it would be difficult for a catechist to teach what God desires him/her to do.

After receiving the instruction from God in prayer, the catechist begins to internalize what he/she heard and transform it into action. This is the period of *preparing*. In order to perform any work one must prepare. The works of a catechist are very comparable to the efforts of a match-maker. In reality, when the match-maker desires to set up a special date for a man and a woman, she prepares ahead of time everything she thinks that would bring the couple together, fall in love and continue to build their relationship.

In preparation, the catechist, too, does all the organizing from A to Z with love and prayer in order to create a great amount of meaningful works, a safe environment, a peaceful area and a spiritual space for a person to meet God. From here a person and God form their loving relationship. The priority of both the match-maker and the catechist is the union relationship of the others. The fruits of their work satisfy them.

Another image of a catechist can be that of a baker. The baker bakes breads every day. He does not bake breads for himself or for his family, but for others. His diligent sacrifice is not only for a day or two but for a lifetime.⁴ Needless to say, the works of the catechist are far more crucial than that of the baker because the fruits of the catechist are not to nourish the physical

³ Sofia Cavalletti, *History's Golden Thread: The History of Salvation*, trans. Rebekah Rojewicz (Canada: Catechesis of the Good Shepherd Publications, 1999), 106.

⁴ Maria Montessori, *Education and Peace*, trans. Helen R. Lane. (Chicago: Henry Regnery Co., 1972), 138.

body, but to nourish the intellect, spirit, and soul. The breads of the baker nourish only the person who consumes them. On the other hand, the fruits of the catechist nourish those who receive it and then continue to pass down others. It keeps going on and on from generation to generation.

In prayer, the catechist converges with God; in preparation, the catechist converges with humanity. Again, the image of the match-maker reappears here celebrating the work well done, when God and humanity unite with one another. This celebrating connects with what Cavalletti writes: “To celebrate is to live the covenant. To live the covenant means to position oneself in reality to align oneself with reality in a constant disposition of receiving and giving. To educate a person to the reality of the covenant and help that person live the covenant in its liturgical moment is to educate him or her to live with gratitude and responsiveness.”⁵

Celebrating is one of the beautiful aspects of the Catholic Church. Throughout the whole liturgical year, the church celebrates all kind of feasts to give reverence to God. These celebrations are called worship. “In the worship of God, we bring our whole lives with us, even that activity in which we use and enjoy the goods of this world. In worship we also bring elements of the lower level of nature with us that are transformed by the world of our hands and mind.”⁶ In celebration the catechist witnesses the life of God at work in the world and in every creature. Therefore, in celebration the circle of life is completed as St. Paul announces: “All belong to you, and you belong to Christ, and Christ belongs to God” (1 Corinthians 3:22-23).

⁵ Sofia Cavalletti, *The Religious Potential of the Child 6 to 12 Years Old* (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 2002), 122.

⁶ Sofia Cavalletti, *History of the Kingdom of God: Liturgy and the Building of the Kingdom* (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 2013), 4.

Through praying, God allows the catechist to share in the circle of love with the Holy Trinity - Father, Son and Holy Spirit. In preparing, God invites the catechist to participate in the continuing work of creation. By celebrating the liturgy, God inserts the spirit of hope in the heart of the catechist to look forward to the Parousia, when God will be all in all.

Reflecting upon all that I have learned at Aquinas Institute and through my encounter with the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd, I recognize how God mysteriously works in my life and shows a plan for me from the very beginning. I was born and raised in a small town of Vietnam. When I was a teenager, I was involved in many church activities. I joined the church choir, participated in the Eucharistic youth movement, and most of all I already took a responsibility as a catechist to teach younger children. One day, a catechist leader introduced me to the religious vocation. He said, “If you become a religious, you could pray for your family more.” That simple phrase captured my heart because I come from a large family. Simple as it seems, that is how my vocation began. At the age of twenty my family received news that we were eligible to migrate and reunite with my older brother in the United States. I brought this concern to my cousin who was a religious brother, and he advised me: “Just take this as an opportunity to study abroad. You can come back later and help the Church in Vietnam.”

I left Vietnam and migrated to the States. Eight months later, I entered the Vietnamese Dominican Sisters in Houston, Texas. When I received the Dominican habit, I took the name Sr. Monica Vianney, OP. Monica was my initial motivation to the religious life to pray for my family. I choose Vianney, after the Curé of Ars, because of his greater desire to pray for the salvation of the whole world. Living the Dominican’s charism and mission, I had many opportunities to continue my education. Within the community I am called to be part of the

formation team with various positions, such as, a vocation director, a novice mistress, a director of the junior sisters. Along with those positions I also became a teacher, and a catechist.

My whole life is a piece of paper filled with simple dots. Connecting these dots indicates God's plan for me to participate in the great work of Salvation History. I continue to be God's helper in this small Dominican community, but also far away, even to the other half of the globe, in my beloved country, where the seed of my ministry was planted.

When I first encountered the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd, my heart was filled with a deep desire to be sent, to be a catechist for my people, to translate this method into my language, and present this beautiful method to the Church in Vietnam.

Praying, preparing, and celebrating are the tasks of the catechist. Praying, preparing, celebrating have brought me to this day in my life. I believe the path that God has chosen for me can overwhelm me, but by gazing at Christ, the greatest Teacher, the path to glory is possible for me.

Bibliography

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