

The Objectivity of the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd

SOFIA CAVALLETTI

In the Apostolic Exhortation *Catechesi Tradendae* (On Catechesis in Our Time), we read that the catechist “will not seek to keep directed towards himself and his personal opinions and attitudes the attention and the consent of the mind and heart of the person he is catechizing. Above all, he will not try to inculcate his personal opinions and options as if they expressed Christ's teaching and the lessons of his life. Every catechist should be able to apply to himself the mysterious words of Jesus: “My teaching is not mine, but his who sent me (John 7:16).” Saint Paul did this when he was dealing with a question of prime importance: ‘I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you (1 Corinthians 11:23).’what detachment from self must a catechist have in order that he can say, ‘My teaching is not mine!’” (N. 6)

The text cited establishes a principle of the utmost importance in catechesis: the need for the catechist to be rigorously objective in the transmission of the message.

In every educational process the educator must put the one to be educated in relationship with reality so that he or she becomes capable of establishing his or her own personal relationship with it. The task of the catechist is to initiate into religious reality, that is to say, (1) to point to the reality that we are surrounded by the presence of a Person, of a Love, because from this knowledge is born (2) a personal relationship with God.

The catechist should work in a direct manner during the first moment, transmitting this “treasure” that was given to her, and helping only in an indirect fashion during the second moment.

We will give some examples.

When we present the parable of the Mystery of Life, we point to the marvelous process of life that develops from a less toward a more, from the smallest to the largest. It is a process that each one can observe and in the face of which each can be amazed; for this, it is not necessary to go to the Gospel. However, in the Gospel there is something more; it tells us that at the source

Catechesis of the Good Shepherd

of this amazing process is a will of love, a Person who calls us to life, and to whose voice we are able to respond, with whom we can enter into relationship. This Person is God.

I may be able to tell you that there is a voice that calls you; however, the inclining of the ear to listen no longer depends on the catechist.

Another example: time and history. Everybody realizes that we live in the flow of time; that in time there is a past, a present, and a future. To know this we do not need to look to God's revelation. However, Scripture tells us something that simple observation of reality does not: time is inhabited by a Person, always present in the history that has upon it his own plan, and who guides its realization, together with men and women and all the children of the world.

This is what I, as a catechist, can tell you; as far as finding your place and your task in the realization of the plan of God, this I cannot do.

The only help that we can give in the second moment is indirect, that of the material that helps personal meditation. The time of work on the material is the moment of the passage from the listening to the response, from the objectivity of the announcement to the subjectivity of the personal reaction.

This impossibility of the catechist being directly active in the second moment of the catechesis is clear to any one of you, and it is not necessary to insist upon it on this occasion.

However, how can the catechist remain in the role of "useless servant" even in the first moment of catechesis, in which she needs to be present and active in the transmission of the deposit of faith? I believe that a way she may do so is by transmitting that which she has received in the most objective manner possible, without personal additions.

In both moments of catechesis, the catechist must remember that she is "a useless servant" and thus, in performing her service, seek to occupy as small a role as possible, taking care not to interject herself into the "internal conversation" that needs to arise between the only Teacher and the disciple.

In both moments of catechesis, the catechist needs to recall that she is an "earthen vessel" that contains "a treasure" of which Paul speaks (2 Corinthians 4:7). It is toward the "treasure" that one must direct the line of vision, without being distracted by secondary elements. The

Catechesis of the Good Shepherd

“vessel” should have as few obstructions as possible. Every personal intrusion by the “earthen vessel” is detrimental to its contents and thus to the “treasure,” and could be an obfuscation of its richness and its beauty. Every personal invasion by the “useless servant” may threaten to drown out the voice of the only Teacher.

The contents of catechesis are things so great that they do not tolerate further embellishment and for which any interference of a personal nature threatens to overshadow and mar. From the catechist is required—I believe—an absolute austerity in the face of the greatness of the Mystery, a capacity to step aside, because it alone occupies the whole field with its splendor.

The Mystery appears in a manner that is continuously greater and more profound and which will attract—catechists and those catechized—with an always growing force. The catechist thus finds herself in the position of one who simultaneously contemplates and acts.

The objectivity in the transmission of faith is important also in the particular didactic of the Church: the liturgy. With regard to this, Guardini writes, “It is extremely important to understand the character of the liturgy that is objective and beyond the personal.... In the liturgy the soul learns to move in the wide world of the objective religious reality.”

The liturgy, in fact, is made up of the historical events of salvation, which are re-presented objectively during the celebration. It happened that God created the world, has called the patriarchs, has liberated Israel from Egypt; it happened that Jesus Christ died and rose again; it is happening that we await his return in fullness. These are facts for the believer; they are objective events that make up faith and hope in all the Church of Jesus Christ. They are the indisputable foundation upon which faith is based and celebration is rooted.

It is through this objective character that the liturgy truly constitutes the basic experience of Church, because it involves all of us in events in which we are participants through a common desire and wait.

The objectivity of the liturgy does not mean that it depersonalizes the relationship of the believer with God, but it puts God in the first place in the history he has been making with humanity, which is also the history of each one of us; it means putting in first place God and the action of God in history; it means a profound respect for God and his action.

Catechesis of the Good Shepherd

Relationship with God expresses itself also, obviously, in other forms than the great liturgical traditions; there are personal attitudes, tendencies towards this or that form of spirituality, particular devotions, and also varied and generous social labors.

All of these are certainly very valid, but they are partial expressions that interest this or that person and, as such, they are not the substance of catechesis. They are contrary to the law of objectivity, and risk closing off into individualism, if they are not set upon the solid base of the liturgical life.

The respect toward objectivity by the catechist will make of catechesis a pleasing experience of freedom for those catechized, who will see open ahead of them the limitless space of Mystery. It is the respect toward objectivity by the catechist that enables a child, who has become an adult, and turned to the faith after a walk that has been extremely tortuous, to say, "The thing that always stayed with me, from all the time I spent in the Center of Catechesis, is the fact of having received and lived out things that were most serious."

Faithfulness to the objectivity of the catechesis, without indulging personal interests and tastes, is also an optimal training in the spirit of poverty that should belong to the catechist; it is a school that trains in the "detachment" emphasized by the cited document.

More, the catechist will find in this very faithfulness to objectivity the source of her greatest joy, because it will become continuously more apparent to her that her hands are empty, and then so much more marvelous will the "pearl" appear within her hands.

Rome, 1998

Reflections on the Objectivity of the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd

FRANCESCA COCCHINI

On several occasions we have had a chance to reflect together on this very fundamental characteristic of the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd which, by way of summary, we can refer to with the term “objectivity.” A short while ago, I again considered this characteristic and have become more certain, not only of its validity, but of its necessity: the Catechesis must be objective. What I intend to say with this expression is that the content of the Catechesis, that which we are transmitting to the children and upon which we meditate together with them, entering more deeply into and enjoying it with them, must consist exclusively of the facts of revelation: Bible and liturgy. The grounds for this objectivity seem to me the following:

This is the way that the first and foundational catechesis took place, that which is less commonly referred to as “evangelization.” It is surprising to think that the Gospels, which contain the announcement, the kerygma, do not give us any information with regard to those who transmitted the announcement, first orally, then in writing, and finally drawing up the definitive text that we possess. From the Gospels, from the names of the final editors, Mark, Matthew, Luke, and John, we do not succeed in picking out their personalities, their experiences, and the “real life” of the persons who have composed these texts. Only with much effort is it possible to pick out something that permits the possibility of placing them in a particular environment, of understanding their principal intentions. I am struck, above all, by noting that with respect to the first announcers, the first catechists, we do not know of any of their “experiences,” not even those we hold to be fundamental: their identity, their family situation, their meeting with Jesus, the motives which spurred them to follow him, the manner in which they lived out their relationship with him. In their narration, everything is “objective.” This absence of accounts of personal experiences by the evangelists strikes me even more when I see that today there is, instead, a tendency to put greatest value on those elements. How many times have we heard expressions of this kind: “The catechist needs to be a witness?” It is a perfectly fair thing to say, certainly, so as to not incur the reproach of Jesus: “Do what they say, but do not imitate what they do!” However, the understanding of “witness” is someone who

Catechesis of the Good Shepherd

gives “witness to herself,” tells about herself, speaks of her “experiences,” and asks the children to do so as well. However in doing so the announcement is lost and confused; we are no longer the “useless servant” in the way that we can be if we instead “serve” the announcement and only the announcement by setting entirely aside our own personal comprehension of it. And, what is more serious still, the ONLY TEACHER is no longer.

In the attempt to verify if in our atrium the catechesis is truly objective, I became aware, with great joy, that our children really do not know anything about us catechists, just like we do not know anything about the life events of the first evangelists. How many times have I heard, for example, that they discover by accident and with amazement, after years of “living together,” that I was the “daughter of Tilde” or the “sister of Patrizia” or that the place where we were “is the house of Sofia”! They are details, however precious.

International Council Meeting, Rome, 2004

Translated by Maureen Armas-Wess

Note: These two articles can also be found in the 2006 *Journal*, Number 21, for The Catechesis of the Good Shepherd, pp. 100-103.