

# Contemporary Catechetics (Christian Instruction) is Not Inclusive Enough

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## ABSTRACT

The Catholic Church has a tradition that is rich in nurturing the faith of the lay faithful and even those faithful who have decided to answer the call of religious life. This article seeks to re-examine the way catechism has been taught and challenges the Church and other faithful to open up the conversation because the present model does not adequately address the essential dimensions of the catechetical enterprise. Contemporary Catechism is not inclusive enough. Also, to be a Church in the actual sense and to reach out holistically in the twenty-first century, a dedication to fostering mature, committed adult communities of faith is core to the life of the Church. Therefore, the church needs to educate in faith for the life span of the Church. To educate in faith goes beyond recitation of dogma or creed. Through library and empirical research, this study found out that Catechesis should go beyond rote learning. It should transcend the question of “Who made you?” In summary, the interest, and experiences of the faithful should be inculcated in the instruction process to enable a holistic mastering of faith. Catechism should enable participants to comprehend and embrace Christian teachings with convictions and to allow such convictions to shape their identity and holiness of life. In all, this study recommends a teaching that goes beyond the memorization of dogmas and creeds, a teaching that captures the interests and aspirations of the laity to enable them to maturely grow in faith. This then is a model for further research.

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## INTRODUCTION

The Catholic Church regards itself as a Church that keeps its traditions no matter what, and it is dedicated in its teaching to winning more souls to the Church. Contemporary Catechetics (Christian instruction) is what the Church has used in an attempt to educate in faith since its inception. Several questions: Does Contemporary Catechesis educate in faith? The Church in its attempt to win more laity has used memorization to educate in faith, but to educate in faith should go beyond memorization or recitation of creed and dogmas especially when one is trying to educate adults in the faith. According to Mary C. Boys “Theology can supply part of the content of religious education but theology cannot provide all of the content of religious education.”<sup>1</sup> If this is the case, it is fitting to explore Boy’s claim about the content of theology not providing all the content to educate in faith. Attending a Catholic School while living with Muslim parents, catechesis was taught in both elementary and high school but it was referred to as religious education. The focus in the teaching

<sup>1</sup> Mary C. Boys, *Educating in Faith* (Lima Ohio Academic Renewal Press, 2001), 18.

of catechesis was memorization and the laity are expected to recite what they have memorized whenever they are asked to do so. E.g. “Why did God make you? God made me love Him and serve in this world and to be happy in life after.” Such are the verses one should memorize. It was rote learning. The laity did not question, critique, or oppose this teaching. This is told as the truth and there is nothing beyond it. Kieran Scott posits that “Catechesis is confessional to the core.” Its primary goal is to awaken, nourish, and deepen one’s inner faith, as well as to pass on the tradition, cement religious identity, and strengthen the ecclesial community. It’s a process of enculturation in a changing community. Catechesis’ identity is today linked to a denominational (Roman Catholic) religion. It is the church’s nursery, and its mission is to acquire and transmit religion: to become planted in and connected with a group of people, and molded into the character and meaning of their community life. It’s been dubbed “religious education’s tribal phase.”<sup>2</sup> This stage may also be referred to as ‘our people’s beliefs, where the child is socialized with imagery and stories. Differentiation between the sacred and the profane is taught and the child identifies with the past, present and future of his/her people’s beliefs. The room for personal conviction does not exist rather conviction in the past is ‘our people’s faith’. This is what this paper is addressing. Catechesis should transcend and incorporate the people’s interests, life growing experiences to enhance faith that is holistic, owned and nurtured by the individual and the community. Catechesis should allow the laity to explore, critique, oppose, and analyze to find meaning in religion?

### Contemporary Catechesis

The meaning of catechesis itself paints a one-sided picture, a picture that is not open to interpretation. In one lecture with Kieran Scott, he stated that; “Catechesis is an enclosed inner border focus on transmission within the church. Catechesis is exclusively Catholic. The early Christians have the original meaning of catechesis. It means ‘handing down a speech from the height.’”<sup>3</sup> For the first five centuries, the act of informing by oral instructions and repetition flourished but started to recede during the reformation. The hope of all catechesis is to assist people in developing their relationship with Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior, in a personal way According to the General Directory for Catechesis (GDC), which cites Pope John Paul II’s *Catechesis Tradendae On Catechesis in Our Time* as an example, “The ultimate goal of catechesis is to bring people into communion and closeness with Jesus Christ, not just with themselves. (number 80) All of our catechetical efforts must be permeated by the desire to lead people to a deeper friendship with Jesus, just as the baptismal catechumenate culminates in people entering into the reality of the paschal mystery—experiencing and celebrating the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ in a very special way at the Easter Vigil—so must all of our catechetical efforts be permeated by the desire to lead people to a deeper friendship with Jesus.”<sup>4</sup> After initiation, the initiate should not become an end to him/herself but rather be opportune with the freedom to broaden his/her search for God thereby finding meaning in daily life. The deepest desire of the initiate which in this case is to own, nurture and incorporate other religious views to enable him/her to broaden his/her concept of God and that of the community should be the core when educating in faith.

In another lecture, Kieran Scott raised the same concerns T.H Groome has about the catechumenate model and catechesis in general. Scott added that; Groome has legitimate concerns that the catechumenate model (and catechesis in general) is “no more than an agency of socialization.’ This, he fears, will be “counterproductive to the model’s true purpose and to be sufficient by itself to promote Christian maturity. This socialization process alone tends simply to maintain the status quo. We have a choice Groome asserts, between being conscious participants in tradition or unconscious victims.”<sup>5</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Kieran Scott, “Three Traditions of Religious Education,” *The Official Journal of the Religious Education Association*, 79, no 3 (1984): 323.

<sup>3</sup> Kieran Scott, “Special Issues in Religious Education” (lecture, Fordham University Rose Hill New York, September 10, 2011).

<sup>4</sup> Pope John Paul II, *Catechesis Tradendae On Catechesis in Our Time* (Rome: St. Paul Editions, 1996), 5.

<sup>5</sup> Thomas H, Groome, *Sharing Faith: A comprehensive Approach to Religious Education and Pastoral Ministry*, (Harper Collins Publishers, New York 1991), 19.

Jean Pierre Antoine has also stated that Torah education and catechesis tend to rhyme: “Torah education is education as nurture and formation. It deals with what is known, normative and given. It reports on that upon which there is consensus. It cultivates a center for life, a core and chain of memory, and an organizing principle of life. One could say, it is the practice of the first naïveté (Ricoeur). It is essentially uncritical or precritical.”<sup>6</sup> This kind of education does not have a second side to it not to talk about a third side. It is exclusive. Antoine went further to add, “Catechesis is the church’s educational endeavor done in the church and on its behalf. It’s unapologetically confessional. The transfer of the heritage is the goal.”<sup>7</sup> Catechesis does not go outside the walls of the church. It is the “language behind the wall” a language that cannot be criticized or object to, a language that is only understood by those behind the wall. It does not live room for one to grow and transcend beyond what is transmitted as gospel truth.

### **Catechesis and Religious Education**

According to R. Rymarz Religious Education is to “assist young men and women to understand themselves as moral persons living the way of Christ through an examination of ethical theories, the revelation of sacred Scripture, and the experience and teaching of the Catholic Church. At the heart of Religious Education is a vision of the person, formed through catechesis for a life of service in and for God.”<sup>8</sup> The Catholic Church is just one denomination therefore, Religious Education should not be relegated to the lens of just one church as if salvation only comes from the Catholic Church.

Two traditional Catholic voices who have written quite a lot on religion and religious education are worth mentioning here. These are J. H. Newman and B. Lonergan. These two scholars differ in various aspects but draw a central point from each other. According to Groome, Newman would claim that catechesis needs religious education if faith is to become real. Lonergan, on the other hand, would insist that authentic knowing must reach beyond understanding to judgment and decision-shaping people’s identity. In summary, Newman would say that catechesis should also be a good education, and Lonergan would add that the best religious education becomes catechetical.”<sup>9</sup> A contrary view to Lonergan’s position is a reductionist position that is intended to put religious education behind the wall. Catechesis can provide some of the content of religious education but it does not provide all of its content. If catechesis is to be meaningful in today’s world, it has to be inclusive of the laity’s interests, views, and daily experiences of God.

It has been the tradition of the church for many years for deacons, brothers, or sisters to teach catechesis. The introduction of a catechist is a new concept, especially when vocations to the priesthood and religious life started dying away in Europe and America. There is always a difference in the way the message is received and digested when taught by rather a clergy or lay faithful. The dynamics and the rapport that goes on in the teaching and learning process are very important if the teaching and learning are to be meaningful. For Moran, “when, for example, catechesis is imparted magisterially by a cleric in a place set aside for the purpose, its message is not the same as when it is decentralized to familiar surroundings, in small groups led by laypeople, with active methods which stimulate responses. The revelation of God to man is not uttered in the same way in the two situations.”<sup>10</sup> The message might be the same but the way it will be nurtured and owned by the laity will be different when impacted by a cleric as compared to when the message is decremented in small groups in familiar places and is being led by one of them preferably a lay person. Religious education in its nature, scope, and content is not closed into itself. Rather it opens the conversation to rich possibilities.

<sup>6</sup> Jean Pierre-Antoine, “*Critical Issues in Religious Education*” 10, no. 3 (2003): accessed January 18, 2021, <http://dx.doi.org/10.15365/joec.1003142013>.

<sup>7</sup> Antoine, “Critical Issues,” 10.

<sup>8</sup> Richard Rymarz, “Catechesis and Religious Education in Canadian Schools” (2011): 5, accessed June 6, 2022 <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/233377676>

<sup>9</sup> Thomas H, Groome, “Religious Education and Catechesis” No Divorce for the Children’s Sake” *The Furrow* 53, no. 11 (2002): 587, accessed January 20, 2021, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27664627>

<sup>10</sup> Gabriel Moran, “Interest in Philosophy” *Three Themes for Religious Education* 81, no. 3 (1986): 424, accessed January 23, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0034408600810308>.

Religious education takes into consideration the ambiguity of words. The disciple seeks to explore the richest meaning of words and language, unlike catechesis which is closed in. People do confuse catechesis for religious education and vice versa. Evangelization and proselytization are also words that people tend to confuse, thinking they have the same meaning and function. This has been the case with catechesis and religious education. Moran further states, “A Catholic Church has the right to terminate a structure ‘catechesis’ if it delivers instructions to current or prospective members.”<sup>11</sup> It has no authority to say that Catechetics is religious education just because the terms are interchanged (or even more peculiarly that religious education is a part of Catechetics). What the Catholic Church accomplishes in catechetical programs is unquestionably important for the advancement of religious education, but catechesis cannot claim to be the entirety or a simple subset of religious education (along with Jewish, Muslim, etc) When the backdrop is religious instruction, what each group undertakes internally faces obstacles and some transformation..”<sup>12</sup> There has to be a distinctive clarity, what is catechesis should not be confused with what is religious education.

The aims of the religious education movement established in 1903 are worth mentioning here. They will show how broad and wide the scope and content of religious education is when laid alongside catechesis. Moran writes, “The goals of the Religious Education Movement in 1903 are still worth pursuing or at least discussing: (1) collaboration among Catholic, Protestant, and Jewish educators; (2) bridging the gap between state schools and religiously affiliated schools; and (3) professionalizing instructional efforts in church and synagogue; that is, if some people require special training for academic instruction, they should be adequately prepared and appropriately compensated for it.”<sup>13</sup> Moran, however, does not mention the fourth aim. Scott mentioned a fourth one which is “an international conversation.”<sup>14</sup> These aims of the movement do not only bring out the scope, content and dynamics of the movement rather they also manifest the length, breadth and depth at which the movement is ready to go to incorporate even the tiniest of ideas. The same questions still hold: Is catechesis broad in content and scope? Does catechesis include or incorporate Jewish, Muslim and Protestant educators? Is there an ongoing conversation to bridge the gap between state schools and religiously affiliated schools? So when critics claim that catechetical theory is an inadequate base for one’s entire understanding of what it means to educate in faith, it is not inclusive enough to embrace the totality of religious education? These are some of the reasons that impede current catechesis from achieving its objective.

William Ellery Channing whose sermon at the Tenth Annual Meeting of the Unitarian Sunday School Society in 1837 reflected a quite different edited opinion about the work of Sunday Schools than that of their evangelical patrons. Channing feared that “Sunday Schools would become vehicles of mechanical teaching, thus passing on religion as a ‘lifeless’ tradition and not quickening reality.”<sup>15</sup> He opposed the view that so much harm is done by giving error to a child as by giving truth in a lifeless form. The trouble with some Christians is not that they hold great errors, but that truth lies dead within them.<sup>16</sup> Catechesis, when not taught properly, can result in mechanical teaching and truth being passed on lifelessly. Catechesis as it was taught then and today closes the curtain of truth while religious education opens that curtain for a dialogical, dialectical and analytical conversation that seeks to reach the deepest truth and meaning of what it means to live religiously.

Channing’s goals of religious education are worth mentioning here. He wrote, “not to stamp our minds irresistibly on the young, but to stir up their own; not to make them see with our eyes, but to make them look inquiringly and steadily with their own; not to give a definite amount of knowledge, but to touch

<sup>11</sup> Moran, “Interest in Philosophy.”

<sup>12</sup> Gabriel Moran, *From Obstacle to Modest Contributor Theology in Religious Education*.(Birmingham AL Religious Education Press, 1982), 43.

<sup>13</sup> Gabriel Moran, *Critical Issues in Religious Education building on the Past*, ( USA, Religious Education Press 1988), 16.

<sup>14</sup> Scott, “Three Traditions of Religious Education”, 323-324.

<sup>15</sup> William Ellery Channing “Unitarian Christianity A Discourse on Some of the Distinguishing Opinions of Unitarians, Delivered at Baltimore,, Boston.” American Unitarian Association, accessed January 26, 2021, <http://www.worldcat.org>oclc>

<sup>16</sup> Channing “Unitarian Christianity; A Discourse on Some of the Distinguishing Opinions of Unitarians.”

inward springs; not to burden the memory, but to prepare them for impartial, conscientious judging of whatever subjects may, in the course of providence, be offered to them.”<sup>17</sup>

Inasmuch as this quote is quite extensive, it brings out if not all but most of the core elements of Religious Education and how people’s lives are affected in the process. To say that catechesis is not important will be a fallacy. The point remains that Catechesis remains the language of the group one is socialized into. One’s culture, beliefs, practices and customs are where growth and death are. Therefore, Scott’s words. “Exclusive Unique” can be used to describe catechesis. Separation from other forms of education is what is at play here while Religious Education is described as “inclusively unique.”

Moran proposes four fundamental “traditions” (as put forward by Scott) of what Religious Education does mean and can mean. Moran calls these terms the four aspects of the quality of conversation, but the author prefers to use Scott’s term ‘exclusively unique.’ His hope is, that it does not serve as a reductionist term.<sup>18</sup> The four quality terms Moran proposes are international, intergenerational, and interinstitutional.

These terms will be briefly discussed.

**International:** This aspect is only obvious; every field of study today has to take account of what is happening worldwide. Biological researchers in Paris are aware of Berkeley and no economist in New York is going to neglect Tokyo. Also, anthropologists study culture worldwide, sociologists are interested in how society operates, class conflict and the scrambled for the limited resources available. An existentialist in Europe might be wondering how much time is spent in churches and other places of worship in Africa and other parts of the world.

**Interreligious:** This term is simply a more emphatic way of saying “religious. If education was not a conversation across some religious boundaries, there would be little need for the existence of the term ‘Religious Education.’ The “inter” is an interreligious approach which means understanding one’s religious position to other religious possibilities.

**Intergenerational:** Education needs to be life long and religious education should appropriately lead the way. Intergenerational provides a helpful reminder that human beings are being taught all the time by those who are younger than they are and those who are older. In a sense, of course, the teaching of children in schools is intergenerational learning; and indeed that form of learning should not be excluded from intergenerational education.

**Inter-institutional:** As lifelong education particularly correlates with religious education, so there should exist constant engagement. “We cannot have effective education unless it engages the major institutions of society. ...inter-institutional education is a geographical interplay of human organizations.”<sup>19</sup>

These four quality terms proposed by Moran are at the heart of Religious Education. They lay the foundation of what religious education is and what it can be. Religious education encourages one to look beyond what is already known and to challenge, and critique one’s self, society, beliefs, practices and culture. This is done not with pre-conceived ideas but it is done to broaden the conversation and reach the deepest meaning of what it means to educate in faith. Does Catechesis go to this extent when it is exclusively tied to itself?

### **Towards an Inclusive Catechesis**

All is not lost with Catechesis. A turnaround can be made but it demands a huge step. It demands a huge leap of faith if catechesis is to educate to liberate because it is only by conviction and ownership of faith that will

<sup>17</sup> Channing, “Unitarian Christianity; A Discourse on Some of the Distinguishing Opinions of Unitarians.”

<sup>18</sup> Scott, “Three Traditions of Religious Education.”

<sup>19</sup> Gabriel Moran, “Religious Education as a Second Language” *British Journal of Educational Studies* 39, no.1 (1991): 92

enable one's unique qualities to grow in an atmosphere of freedom. Freire wrote extensively about "Banking and Problem posing concepts of education." He stated that "those truly committed to freedom must reject the banking notion in its totality, instead of adopting a paradigm of women and men as conscious beings, and consciousness as consciousness intent on the world,"<sup>20</sup> The days are gone when learners are looked at as empty slates or vessels with no previous experience. Looking at learners as funnels to be used to purify either gas or oil into a jar is outdated in contemporary times. If catechesis is truly committed to liberation, the laity must be part of the planning process. It should take this gigantic leap of faith to start educating to liberate by making the learner part of the teaching and learning process. True education will only take place when the learner is free to critique, analyze, modify, and conceptualized what is presented. The learner then tries to make meaning of what is presented.

Another place catechesis could run to and remedy itself is the whole idea of J. Dewey's Progressive Education. Dewey's work is geared toward the growth of the human person. Man is destined to grow and adapt to his/her environment. Therefore, Dewey's work is rooted in a biological conception of the human being. This insinuates that he regards the human being as a growing organism whose major development task is to come to terms, through adaptation or transformation, with the environment in which he or she lives. Because the environment is not always hospitable to the comfort or even the survival of the organism, thinking is required. It is through the exercise and development of intelligence that the environment is reshaped. It is through the reshaping process that the individual learns and through which intelligence grows. In this sense, for Dewey, human life is a continuous process of constructive adaptation. Intelligence itself is not fixed, it grows. It is not a thing, it is a process. It is not restricted to a limited sphere of content-words or numbers-but manifests itself wherever and in whatever material problems can be posed and solved.<sup>21</sup> Growth does not take place in a vacuum nor by cutting one's self from the reality (s) of the present. If one is to grow uniquely, one has to explore his environment and by doing his/her intelligence is exercised, expanded, and free of judgment and stereotype. As intelligence is not fixed, but it is a process, so is the teaching and learning process of any disciple should be. If Catechesis is to start speaking the language outside the wall, it has to risk in this direction.

Dewey uses the word "child" and has been criticized for that which can be substituted with the word 'learner.' The learner should be seen as part and parcel of the process of faith formation. In Dewey's optimism about what education is and can be, he wrote, "It was no longer proper to treat the child (learner) as a passive receptacle for curriculum knowledge to be poured into." Mind and emotion could no longer be considered separate entities. The curriculum could no longer be viewed as a fixed, monolithic body of knowledge developed in administrative offices and passed down to instructors."<sup>22</sup> The learner should be seen as an active participant in the teaching and learning of any disciple catechesis inclusive here. The catechesis has been taught for the past decade, handing down the truth and the learner seen as a neophyte needs to be re-examined.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

If catechesis wants to educate in faith, it needs to get itself outside of the wall and face the reality(s) of the world today. It needs to make the experience of the learner part of the teaching and learning process. The school should not be used to indoctrinate or proselytize rather the school is a place where absolute freedom to critique, analyze, modify, challenge, and re-conceptualization takes place. To educate in faith goes beyond one's own cultural or traditional beliefs of one's people. It goes beyond the tribal stage or "first naiveté". One should be able to step back in disbelief and reassess to make the greatest of meanings.

The Catholics often recall the words of Pope John XXIII when he opened the Second Vatican Council. He said it was time to "open the windows and let in the fresh air." The Church should be open to issues of

<sup>20</sup> Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Continuum International Publishing Group Inc, 1993), 72.

<sup>21</sup> John Dewey, "Progressive Education and the Science of Education." *Recherche and Formation* 92, no. 3 (2019): 72.

<sup>22</sup> Dewey, "Progressive Educatuion,"

the world and other faith traditions. Issues the Church grappled with in the 1920s are evolving, therefore, the Church should respond to the signs of the times. Christian Instruction should not be an end to itself or a finished product but rather the laity should be seen as a seed that would grow and flower and flourish, bringing new life with each decade.

## CONCLUSION

Catechesis should go beyond rote learning. It should transcend the question of “Who made you? Why did God make you?” Rather, the interest, and experiences of the faithful should be inculcated to enable a holistic mastering of faith. Regan simply puts it when she wrote “The catechist must intend for individuals to know their faith to the core of their being.”<sup>23</sup> This will be a knowledge that informs, shapes, and transforms people in the Christian faith, going beyond what the GDC refers to as “mere facts.” Participants should be able to understand and embrace Christian doctrines with conviction, allowing these beliefs to form their identity, holiness of life, and resolve to establish God’s rule in the world. If this is achieved then the church is educating in faith because when it educates in faith, it has the effect of creating a context that supports the life of faith of everyone in the community.

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<sup>23</sup> Jane E. Regan, *Exploring The Catechism* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1995), 18.

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