

Preaching the Gospel in the contemporary world

General Directory for Catechesis 1997

Introduction

"Behold! A sower went out to sow. As he sowed some seed fell along the path, and the birds came and devoured it. Other seed fell on rocky ground, where it had not much soil, and immediately it sprang up, since it had no depth of soil; and when the sun rose it was scorched, and since it had no root it withered away. Other seed fell among thorns which grew up and choked it, and it yielded no grain. And other seeds fell into good soil and brought forth grain, growing up and increasing, and yielding thirty fold, sixty fold, and a hundred fold" (Mk 4:3-8).

The purpose of this Introduction is to foster in pastors and catechists a greater consciousness of the necessity to keep in mind the field in which the seed is sown, and to do so with the perspective of faith and mercy. The interpretation of the contemporary world presented here is obviously dependant on contingent historical circumstances.

"Behold! A sower going out to sow" (Mk 4,3)

The parable of the sower going out to sow is the source of inspiration for evangelization. The seed is the word of God (Lk 8:11). The sower is Jesus Christ. Two thousand years ago he proclaimed the Gospel in Palestine and sent the disciples to sow the Gospel in the world. Today, 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. The conditions of the soil into which it falls vary greatly. The Gospel "falls by the wayside" (Lk 4,4) when it is not really heard; it falls on "stony soil" without taking root; it falls "amongst the thorns" (Lk 4:2) where it is quickly choked by the cares and troubles that weigh upon the hearts of men. Nonetheless, some seed falls "on good soil" (Mk 4:8) that is among men and women who are open to a personal relationship with God and who are in solidarity with their neighbour. This seed brings forth fruit in great abundance. Jesus, in the parable of the sower, proclaims the Good News that the Kingdom of God is near, notwithstanding the problems in the soil, the tensions, conflicts and difficulties of the world. The Gospel seed makes fertile the history of mankind and promises a rich harvest. Jesus also cautions, however, that the word of God grows only in a well disposed heart.

Looking at the world from the standpoint of faith

The Church continues to sow the Gospel in God's field. Christians, in the most diverse social situations, perceive the world with the same eyes with which Jesus contemplated the society of his time. The disciple of Jesus Christ deeply shares the "joys and hopes, the sadness and the anxieties of the men today". He gazes upon human history and participates in it, not only from the standpoint of reason but also from that of faith. In the light of faith

the world appears at once "created and sustained by the love of the Creator, which has been freed from the slavery of sin by Christ, who was crucified and rose". 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, the seed renewing believers is the hope of a definitive "fulfilment". A world-view not incorporating these three elements cannot be authentically Christian. Hence the importance of a catechesis capable of initiating catechumens and those to be catechized into a "theological reading of modern problems".

The field that is the world

The Church, Mother of mankind, above all, sees with profound sorrow "an innumerable multitude of men and women, children, adults and old people and unique human beings, who suffer misery".

By means of catechesis, in which due emphasis is given to her social teaching, the Church desires to stir Christian hearts "to the cause of justice" and to a "preferential option or love for the poor", so that her presence may really be light that shines and salt that cures.

Human rights

The Church, in her analysis of the soil of the world, is acutely conscious of everything that injures the dignity of the human person. She is aware that all human rights spring from this dignity, the constant object of Christian concern and commitment. For this reason, she looks beyond mere "social and economic indices" to embrace also cultural and religious factors. What interests the Church is above all the integral development of the human person and of all peoples. She notes with joy that "a beneficial trend is advancing and permeating peoples of the earth, making them ever more aware of the dignity of the individual". Her vigorous insistence on respect for human rights and her decisive rejection of all their violations are clear expressions of that consciousness. The right to life, work, education, the foundation of a family, participation in public life, and to religious liberty are, today, demanded more than ever.

In many places, however, human rights are clearly violated, in apparent contradiction of the dignity proper to the human person. Such violations feed other forms of poverty beyond the material level: they contribute to a cultural and religious impoverishment which equally concerns the Church. The negation or restriction of human rights impoverishes the human person and entire peoples at least as much as, if not more than, material privation itself. The evangelizing activity of the Church in this field of human rights has, as its undeniable objective, the task of revealing the inviolable dignity of every human person. In a certain sense, "it is the central and unifying task of service which the Church, and the lay faithful in her, are called to render to the human family". Catechesis must prepare them for this task.

Culture and cultures

The sower knows that the seed falls on specific soils and that it must absorb all the elements that enable it to bear fruit. He also knows that some of these elements can prejudice the germination of the seed and indeed the very harvest itself.

The Constitution *Gaudium et Spes* underlines the importance of science and technology for the birth and development of modern culture. The scientific mentality, which derives from them, profoundly modifies "culture and ways of thinking", with consequent human and religious repercussions. Modern man is deeply influenced by this scientific and experimental method.

Nevertheless, there is today a growing realization that such a mentality is incapable of explaining everything. Scientists themselves acknowledge that the rigour of experimental method must be complemented by some other method of knowing, if a profound understanding of the human being is ever to be attained. Linguistic theory, for example, shows that symbolic thought affords an approach to the mystery of the human person which would otherwise remain inaccessible. A rationalism which does not dichotomize man but which integrates his affective dimension, unifies him and gives fuller meaning to his life, is thus indispensable.

Together with this "more universal form of culture", there is a growing desire to esteem anew autochthonous cultures. The question posed by the Second Vatican Council is still valid: "What is to be done to prevent increased exchange between cultures (which ought to lead to genuine and fruitful dialogue between groups and nations) from disturbing the life of communities, overthrowing traditional wisdom and endangering the character proper to each people".

- In many places there is an acute awareness that traditional cultures are being assailed by powerful external forces and by alien imitations of imported life-styles, with the result that the identity and values proper to peoples are thus being gradually eroded.
- Similarly acknowledged is the widespread influence of the communications media, which out of economic or ideological interest, often imposes a vision of life which does not respect the cultural distinctiveness of the peoples whom they address.

Thus, with inculturation, evangelization encounters one of its greatest challenges. In the light of the Gospel, the Church must appropriate all the positive values of culture and of cultures and reject those elements which impede development of the true potential of persons and peoples.

Religious and moral factors

Amongst the elements which make up the cultural heritage of a people, religious and moral factors are of particular interest to the sower. There is in contemporary culture a persistent

spread of religious indifference: "Many however of our contemporaries... either do not at all perceive, or else explicitly reject, this intimate and vital bond of man to God".

Atheism, understood as a negation of God, "must therefore be regarded as one of the most serious problems of our time". While it can take various forms, it often appears today under the guise of secularism, which consists in an excessively autonomous view of man and of the world "according to which it is entirely self-explanatory without any reference to God". In the specifically religious sphere there are signs of "a return to the sacred", of a new thirst for transcendent reality and for the divine. The contemporary world acknowledges in a more comprehensive and vital way "the renewed interest in religious research". Certainly this phenomenon "is not without ambiguity". The widespread growth of sects and new religious movements and the revival of "fundamentalism" are factors of serious concern for the Church and require careful analysis

The moral situation of today is on a par with its religious situation. There is an evident obscuring of the ontological truth of the human person—as though the denial of God meant an interior breakdown of the aspirations of the human being. In many places this contributes to the rise of an "ethical relativism which would remove any sure moral reference point from political and social life". Evangelization encounters a privileged field of activity in the religious and moral sphere. Indeed the primordial mission of the Church is to proclaim God and to be his witness before the world. This involves making known the true face of God and his loving plan of salvation for man, as it has been revealed in Jesus Christ. To prepare such witnesses, it is necessary for the Church to develop a profoundly religious catechesis, nourished on the Gospel, which will deepen man's encounter with God and forge a bond of permanent communion with Him.

The Church in the world

The faith of Christians

The disciples of Jesus are scattered in the world as leaven but, as in every age, they are not immune from the influences of human situations. It is therefore necessary to enquire into the current situation of the faith of Christians. Catechetical renewal, developed in the Church over the last decades, continues to bear very welcome fruit. The catechesis of children, of young people and of adults has given rise to a type of Christian who is conscious of his faith and who acts consistently with it in his life.

In such Christians, this catechesis has encouraged:

- a new and vital experience of God as merciful Father;
- a more profound rediscovery of Jesus Christ, not only in his divinity but also in his humanity;
- a sense of co-responsibility on the part of all for the mission of the Church in the world;

- and a raising of consciousness with regard to the social obligations of the faith.

Nonetheless, in considering today's religious situation, the Church is also obliged to take into account the extent to which Christians "have been shaped by the climate of secularism and ethical relativism?" A prime category requiring examination is that of the "many people who have been baptized but lead lives entirely divorced from Christianity". This in fact constitutes a mass of "non-practising Christians" even though in many hearts religious feeling has not been completely lost. Re-awakening these to the faith is a real challenge for the Church. Then there are "the simple people" who express themselves, at times with sincere religious feeling and deep rooted "popular devotion". They possess a certain faith, "but know little even of its fundamental principles". There are, moreover, numerous other Christians, often highly educated, whose religious formation amounts solely to that which they received in childhood. These also need to re-examine and develop their faith "from a different standpoint".

There is also a certain number of baptized Christians who, desiring to promote dialogue with various cultures and other religious confessions, or on account of a certain reticence on their part to live in contemporary society as believers, fail to give explicit and courageous witness in their lives to the faith of Jesus Christ. These concrete situations of the Christian faith call urgently on the sower to develop a new evangelization, especially in those Churches of long-standing Christian tradition where secularism has made greater inroads. In this new context of evangelization, missionary proclamation and catechesis, especially of the young and of adults, is an evident priority.

The internal life of the ecclesial community

It is important to consider also the very life of the ecclesial community which is its innermost quality. Firstly, it is necessary to see how the Second Vatican Council has been accepted in the Church, and how it has borne fruit. The great conciliar documents have not remained a dead letter: their effects are widely acknowledged. The four constitutions (Sacrosanctum Concilium, Lumen Gentium, Dei Verbum and Gaudium et Spes) have indeed enriched the Church. In fact:

- liturgical life is more profoundly understood as the source and summit of ecclesial life;
- the people of God has acquired a keener awareness of the "common priesthood" founded on Baptism, and is rediscovering evermore the universal call to holiness and a livelier sense of mutual service in charity;
- the ecclesial community has acquired a livelier sense of the word of God. Sacred Scripture, for example, is read, savoured and meditated upon more intensely;
- the mission of the Church in the world is perceived in a new way: on the basis of interior renewal, the Second Vatican Council has opened Catholics to the demands of evangelization as necessarily linked to dialogue with the world, to human

development, to different cultures and religions as well as to the urgent quest for Christian unity.

It must be recognized, however, that in the midst of this richness there also occur "difficulties about the acceptance of the Council". Despite so comprehensive and profound an ecclesiology, the sense of belonging to the Church has weakened and "a certain disaffection towards the Church is frequently noted". Thus the Church is often regarded in a one-dimensional way as a mere institution and deprived of her mystery. In some instances tendentious positions have been adopted and set in opposition to the interpretation and application of the renewal sought in the Church by the Second Vatican Council. Such ideologies and conduct have led to divisions which damage that witness of communion indispensable to evangelization. The evangelizing activity of the Church, catechesis included, must tend all the more decisively toward solid ecclesial cohesion. To this end it is urgent that an authentic ecclesiology of communion, be promoted and deepened in order to arouse in Christians a deep ecclesial spirituality.

The situation of catechesis: its vitality and difficulties

The vitality of catechesis in recent years has been amply demonstrated by many positive aspects. Amongst others the following must be highlighted:

- the great number of priests, religious and laity who devote themselves with enthusiasm to catechesis, one of the most important ecclesial activities.
- the missionary character of contemporary catechesis and its ability to secure adherence to the faith on the part of catechumens and those to be catechized in a world in which religious sense is obscured must also be underlined: in this dynamic there is an acute awareness that catechesis must have a catechumenal style, as of integral formation rather than mere information; it must act in reality as a means of arousing true conversion;
- consonant with what has been said, concerning the expanding role of adult catechesis the catechetical programmes of many particular Churches assume extraordinary importance. This option appears to be a priority in the pastoral planning of many dioceses, and also plays a central role in many ecclesial groups and movements;
- promoted no doubt by recent directions of the Magisterium, catechetical thought, has gained much in our times in terms of quality and profundity. In this sense many local Churches already have at their disposal suitable and opportune pastoral programmes.

It is necessary, however, to examine with particular attention some problems so as to identify their solutions:

- the first concerns the conception of catechesis as a school of faith, an initiation and apprenticeship in the entire Christian life of which catechists do not yet have a full understanding.
- with regard to the fundamental direction of catechesis, catechetical activity is still usually impregnated with the idea of 'Revelation': however, the conciliar concept of 'Tradition' is much less influential as an inspiration for catechesis: in much catechesis, indeed, reference to Sacred Scripture is virtually exclusive and unaccompanied by sufficient reference to the Church's long experience and reflection, acquired in the course of her two-thousand-year history. The ecclesial nature of catechesis, in this case, appears less clearly; the inter-relation of Sacred Scripture, Tradition and the Magisterium, each according to "its proper mode" does not yet harmoniously enrich a catechetical transmission of the faith;
- Concerning the object of catechesis, which always seeks to promote communion with Jesus Christ, it is necessary to arrive at a more balanced presentation of the entire truth of the mystery of Christ. Often, emphasis is given only to his humanity without any explicit reference to his divinity; at other times, less frequently today, emphasis is so exclusively placed on his divinity that the reality of the mystery of the Incarnate Word is no longer evident;
- Various problems exist with regard to the content of catechesis: there are certain doctrinal lacunae concerning the truth about God and man; about sin and grace and about eschatology; there is a need for a more solid moral formation; presentations of the history of the Church are inadequate; and too little importance is given to her social teaching; in some regions there has been a proliferation of catechisms and texts, the products of particular initiatives whose selective tendencies and emphases are so differing as to damage that convergence necessary for the unity of the faith;
- "Catechesis is intrinsically bound to every liturgical and sacramental action" Frequently however, the practice of catechetics testifies to a weak and fragmentary link with the liturgy: limited attention to liturgical symbols and rites, scant use of the liturgical fonts, catechetical courses with little or no connection with the liturgical year; the marginalization of liturgical celebrations in catechetical programs;
- Concerning pedagogy, after a period in which excessive insistence on the value of method and techniques was promoted by some, sufficient attention is still not given to the demands and to the originality of that pedagogy which is proper to the faith. It remains easy to fall into a 'content-method' dualism, with resultant reductionism to one or other extreme; with regard to the pedagogical dimension the requisite theological discernment has not always been exercised;
- Regarding differences between cultures in the service of the faith, it is difficult to know how to transmit the Gospel within the cultural horizons of the peoples to whom it is proclaimed, in such a way that it can be really perceived as Good News for the lives of people and of society;

- Formation for the apostolate and for mission is one of the fundamental tasks of catechesis. Nevertheless while there is a new sensitivity to the formation of the laity for Christian witness, for inter religious dialogue, and for their secular obligations, education for missionary activity "ad gentes" still seems weak and inadequate. Frequently, ordinary catechesis gives only marginal and inconsistent attention to the missions.

The sowing of the Gospel

Having tested the ground, the sower sends out his workers to proclaim the Gospel through all the world and to that end shares with them the power of his Spirit. At the same time he shows them how to read the signs of the times and asks of them that special preparation which is necessary to carry out the sowing.

How to read the signs of the times

The voice of the Spirit, which Jesus, on behalf of the Father, has communicated to his disciples "resounds in the very events of history". Behind the changing data of present situations and in the deep motives of evangelization, it is necessary to discover "what may be genuine signs of the presence or the purpose of God".

Such analysis, however, must always be done in the light of faith. Availing herself of the human sciences, which are always necessary, the Church seeks to discover the meaning of the present situation within the perspective of the history of salvation. Her judgements on reality are always a diagnosis of the need for mission.

Some challenges for catechesis

In order to express its vitality and to be efficacious, catechesis today needs to undertake the following challenges and directions:

- Above all it needs to present itself as a valid service to evangelization of the Church with an accent on missionary character;
- It should address itself to those who have been and continue to be its privileged recipients: children, adolescents, young people and adults;
- Based on the example of catechesis in the patristic era, it needs to form the personality of the believer and therefore be a true and proper school of Christian pedagogy;
- It needs to announce the essential mysteries of Christianity, promoting the trinitarian experience of life in Christ as the centre of the life of faith;
- It needs to consider as its primary task the preparation and formation of catechists in the deep riches of the faith.