

USING THE BIBLE IN CATECHESIS

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Dr Linnig explores both common pitfalls in using the Scriptures in catechesis and how we can foster an authentically Catholic use

‘[T]he ministry of the word... (should be) healthily nourished and (should) thrive in holiness through the word of Sacred Scripture’
Catechesi Tradendae 27, citing *Dei Verbum* 10 and 24.

Pope John Paul II asserts in *Catechesi Tradendae* (CT) 27 that the Word of God is the living source for catechesis. How, then, can we use the Bible and transmit this ‘Word of Scripture’ so that it may be a life-long source of strength and nourishment for those we catechize?

Common difficulties

Before embarking upon a discussion of this question, it may be useful to consider a few preliminary difficulties that many catechists confront as they use Sacred Scripture in their catechesis.

In preparing a catechetical session based on Sacred Scripture, catechists may be tempted to use the Bible only as a source of stories to illustrate faith in Christ. On the other hand, if a catechist attempts to delve more deeply into the Psalms or New Testament epistles, for example, listeners may find the texts very ‘abstract’, ‘divorced from ordinary life’ and ‘only for specialists’.

Catechists are faced with two questions. First, can it be true that the Bible and biblical commentaries are for specialists only? Secondly, how can we, in our catechesis, address this tension between the Bible as just a collection of stories on the one hand, and a set of esoteric manuscripts on the other?

When using the Old Testament in our catechesis, we often meet another set of obstacles. As Catholics, how can we connect our Christian beliefs to the faith of the Jews? The God of the Old Testament appears to contradict the God of the New Testament. He is a harsh judge, chastising his people with no pity, while the God of the New Testament manifests tenderness and mercy. Many catechists find the task of discerning the links between the Old and New Covenant much too complex, and thus focus primarily on just one of the two Testaments. Is it enough for us to use only either the Old Testament or the New Testament for the Word of God? If we do this, can the word of God really become the living source for our catechesis?

A source of the difficulties

The source of some of these difficulties stems, in part, from how catechists have been formed. After the Second Vatican Council, in France and in several German-speaking countries, many Catholics reacted against a strongly dogmatic catechesis, where the Bible was used as simply

a resource to explain dogmatic truths. Those reacting in this way gave predominance to 'experience' in their catechesis, arguing that, when personal experience meets the biblical word, faith ought to be deepened. Thus, dogma and systematic teaching was ignored, and through that ignorance, catechists no longer recognised the unity and internal consistency of the Bible.

Certain methods of Biblical exegesis also enabled this rise in the predominance of experience. If we read the Bible only with the historical-critical method, with scientific methods based on the presupposition that an interpretation of the text may be accomplished completely using purely rational and human explanations, then Sacred Scripture may unfortunately be reduced to a word of the past. Personal experience then becomes the only criterion for its relevance - 'I only believe what I experience myself'.

Cardinal Schönborn, during a conference held in Gaming, Austria in the summer of 2003, asked a series of similar questions that have great bearing upon the issue at hand: 'What can we do to prevent the Bible from being reduced to a collection of miscellaneous stories, regarded as fairy tales, with no historical basis? How can we find again the unity of the history of our salvation in the Bible? How can we find the Word of God as 'living and efficacious' for us today?'

Ecclesial reading

The resolution to all of these conflicts, as I hope to demonstrate, is to be found in an ecclesial vision and reading of the Bible. At the heart of this ecclesial vision, which necessarily inspires all interpretation and use of Sacred Scripture, is the following goal:

'The definitive aim of catechesis is to put people not only in touch but *in communion, in intimacy, with Jesus Christ*: only He can lead us to the love of the Father in the Spirit and make us share in the life of the Holy Trinity'. (CT 5)

This passage emphasises that catechesis is not only a matter of transmitting the faith, of helping people to acquire an intellectual knowledge, a systematic understanding of doctrine, but is also a question of establishing a living relationship with the person of Christ, a living relationship with the Trinity. From this, then, we may also see that the use of Sacred Scripture in catechesis ought both to impart knowledge of the faith and enable others to come to know Jesus Christ.

If we assent to the above proposition, the question remains: what must we do, in practical, concrete terms, to reach this aim? It is my wish to address this question by examining three points:

- The link between *fides qua* and *fides quae*, that is, between faith as a relationship with God and faith as acceptance of truth
- The effects of this link when we use the Bible for catechesis
- The living reading of the Bible in catechesis.

Fides qua and fides quae

Fides qua and *fides quae* are sometimes spoken of in terms of 'experience' and 'instruction'. *Catechesi Tradendae* 22 speaks of an alleged opposition between 'orthodoxy' and

‘orthopraxis’ - or, we might say, between convictions and actions, or again between ‘serious and orderly study of the message of Christ’ and ‘life experience with Christ’. Although we are not directly examining the question of whether we should neglect study for the benefit of experience, or reject experience for the benefit of doctrinal catechesis, the fact that many believe these two aspects to be somehow in opposition does make it necessary to clarify the language we use in this context. So we need to ask ourselves, what does the word ‘experience’ mean?

Understanding experience

‘Experience’ indicates some knowledge based on contact with reality, a knowledge acquired through life or through experiment. Here we must avoid two extremes: reducing experience to something to which we are subjected, such as a simple feeling or a merely subjective emotion (the position of empiricism) and reducing experience to something the human spirit builds itself (the position of idealism). In fact, experience concomitantly consists both in letting reality come to us (natural or supernatural) and in taking an active part in welcoming it with all that we are. The national text given by the Conference of French Bishops to orientate catechesis in France clarified this distinction when they defined the term ‘experience’ as the conjunction of an external event with its inner welcoming by a person.

Since we are here discussing Christian religious experience, we identify it with knowledge through *connaturalité*, in other words, through a likeness of being or a union between the one who knows and the One who is known. This experience, which commits the whole of the human person, is at the root of the testimony a person can bear to Christ:

‘Something which has existed since the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our own eyes, which we have watched and touched with our own hands, the Word of life...this is our theme. That life was made visible; we saw it and are giving our testimony, declaring to you the eternal life, which was present to the Father and has been revealed to us.’ (1 Jn 1:1-2).

We must further distinguish *human experience* from *Christian experience*. The former is everyday experience which is both the starting and anchor point of catechesis, for it is in human experience that the great questions about life and its meaning arise. Christian Revelation is not

‘isolated from life nor artificially juxtaposed to it. It is concerned with the ultimate meaning of life and it illumines the whole of life with the light of the Gospel, to inspire it or to question it’ (CT 22).

Revelation, however, introduces something radically new to human existence; it inspires human life divinely, it purifies from what is opposed to faith. Christian experience is the experience of a new life with God. If it is true that young people, for example, need Christian experience, it means that they need concrete examples of Christian life, of saints, who bear witness to faith through their lives. This testimony conveys a greater credibility than mere ideas and doctrines.

It is striking to notice that both *Catechesi Tradendae* and the *General Directory for Catechesis* (GDC) use the word ‘life’ more often than Christian ‘experience’. Why is this? Precisely because of a difficulty we have already noted: the word ‘experience’ risks

misunderstandings arising from empiricist or scientific objectivist connotations. Moreover, 'experience' is limited for it supposes a certain 'knowledge' of what has been lived. Christian faith, on the other hand, is a 'mystery', hiding some aspects of which we may not be aware. For example, we can know we have received a grace only through its effects. Saint Teresa of the Child Jesus, for instance, did not have 'direct experience' of the grace of her conversion on Christmas 1886; she only became aware of the grace through its subsequent effects.

The word 'life' implicitly offers a better inclusion of all dimensions of faith. It places the person at the centre of faith. 'Life' also includes what is deeper in a person: his or her interior life, story, relationship with God and what the Bible calls 'the heart'.

Life and teaching

What are the reciprocal relations between *fides qua*, life with God (including those experiences of which we are not aware), and *fides quae*, the teaching of the truths of faith? This is less a question of two separate aspects than of a double dimension of faith in Christ. According to CT 5 and GDC 80, the aim of catechesis is an intimate and living relationship with Christ and through him with the whole Trinity. This living relationship with God exists from the beginning of their journey: from an initial relationship of faith (GDC 85) one must grow and reach a relationship of maturity of faith which is Christian perfection, sanctity (GDC 56).

This journey in faith requires systematic teaching of the Faith that will answer the believer's desire to know the Saviour better. Such teaching nourishes one's relationship with God and makes one a witness (GDC 85). The teaching of the contents of Revelation is ordered to the living relationship with God as means towards an end. Moreover, this teaching of the truth is welcomed in accordance with the 'trust in the person who bears witness to it' (GDC 54, citing CCC 177).

The so-called conflict that springs between *fides qua* and *fides quae* is solved by an ecclesial vision of the life of faith, which grounds catechesis itself. If we are to use the Bible in catechesis, this point is extremely significant, for it indicates our understanding that the Bible is not only a source of truths from which to learn; it is a way to enter the very life of God.

Sacred Scripture and catechesis

What bearing does this have on our catechesis? The GDC distinguishes the *source* from the *sources* of catechesis (GDC 94). The *source* of catechesis is the Word of God himself, God speaking to men, His Word, Christ Himself. The *sources* are the means through which God communicates with us. God uses our language and our human gestures to speak to us. The Tradition of the Church and Sacred Scripture are sources of catechesis.

A few remarks are essential here. The GDC echoes *Dei Verbum*, emphasizing above all that God's action is first, God who 'in his goodness and wisdom' reveals himself and makes 'known the mystery of his will' of salvation (DV 2). It is also important not to forget that, for Revelation to exist, it is necessary for man to welcome it.

Revelation, the *source* and end of catechesis, is an interaction according to a covenant; it is a divine and human interaction, a life of relationship, which reaches fulfilment in Christ, who is true God and true man. Thus, catechesis must lead men to a life with God, to participation in

divine life itself. (As an aside, we should note that our catechesis should not only present the source, but also how one may drink from this source in order to replenish and sustain this communication and communion with God.)

The *sources* of catechesis are the means; they help to develop the covenant between God and man so that man may enter this dynamic Revelation which is life. These means are a mediation leading to an immediate and actual relationship with God. They transmit Revelation. As witnesses to the Covenant, they are the instruments of this 'covenantal life'.

Finding the Spirit in the letter

Sacred Scripture, therefore, cannot be reduced to just one of the dimensions of Revelation. The Bible neither gives us a human word only, nor a divine word only, but one inside the other, indissolubly. Catholic Tradition sometimes refers to these two intimately related dimensions in terms of 'letter' and 'spirit'.

Moreover, as an act of Revelation, the Bible transmits both God's gift and man's answer. As this witness and instrument of Revelation, Sacred Scripture cannot be separated from the Church. The GDC stresses that the sources of catechesis are tightly bound and closely connected with each other (GDC 96). Living Tradition cannot exist without Sacred Scripture. Neither can we use the Bible in an authentic way without reference to living Tradition of the Church. The Bible, in fact, is living Tradition, a book written by human authors.

How can we discover in the Bible the divine dimension, God's mystery itself? How can we discover God's 'spirit' in the 'letter' written by men? This is only possible thanks to the testimony of the Church, the community of those who have entered divine Revelation, who live it and transmit it to others. It is in this community that the Bible was born. It is also in this community that the Bible thrives and manifests its eternal newness. It is the Church that discerns that this book is the Word of God. This Word, in turn, may be constantly witnessed in her life, in her sacraments, liturgy, prayer and charity.

The living reading of the Bible in catechesis

In concrete terms, in our catechesis, how can we read the Bible as the Word of God, capable of transforming the life of those being catechized? How can our reading be a *living reading*?

The Bible both *contains* the Word of God and really *is* the Word of God (DV 24). In it *the Father* comes to bring men into communion with him (DV 21). Because God offers his love in this way, it is essential to seek this God, his Word and his love, in the Bible. This affirmation of faith precedes and directs our reading. The Bible is not only a text to analyse but also offers a life to share. The written letter contains divine meaning that is life, the very mystery of God. In our catechesis, we must look for this meaning which is only attainable by faith.

Christ is the Word of God. As St Jerome states, 'To be ignorant of Sacred Scripture is to be ignorant of Christ'. The Old and New Testament are unified in Christ, since it is Christ who creates and shows their unity, as he himself is the unity of God's design. In their reading, catechists can discover with Christ how the Old Testament announces, prepares and explains the New Testament (DV 14-16).

Sacred Scripture is inspired by *the Holy Spirit*. The Spirit ensures that human language has transmitted ‘whatever God wanted written and no more’, revealed for our salvation (DV 11). Only the Holy Spirit, who inspired Sacred Scripture (DV 12), can open our mind to comprehend the depths of the Word, as CCC 109 indicates through its introduction of the Holy Spirit as ‘the interpreter of Sacred Scripture’. Every reading of the Bible in catechesis must then be ‘spiritual’, even if it is first a matter of distinguishing the literal meaning from the ‘spiritual’ meaning.

If we take seriously the above suggestion, our catechesis will truly be a ‘catechesis in the Spirit’. Praying to the Holy Spirit is not a mere pious action, but the very foundation of catechesis. Pope John Paul II has expressed it in this way:

‘Yes, to get to a fully acceptable interpretation of the words which the Holy Spirit inspired, one must be guided by the Holy Spirit and, for that, one must pray, pray a lot and ask, in one’s prayer, for the inner light given by the Spirit and obediently welcome this light; ask for love, which is the only one that makes one capable of understanding God’s language, which “is love” (1 Jn 4, 8.16). Even while interpreting, one must maintain oneself in God’s presence as much as possible’.

We ought not only to read Scripture with the Holy Spirit, but also with the Church’s faith, in accord with the living Tradition of the Church. This may be done by reading the Bible in connection with Catholic dogma, Magisterial documents and, of course, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. In another sense, reading Scripture with the Church’s faith may also legitimately include reading with others, discussing the meaning we have found, sharing with charity the lights that we have all received.

Catechesis, as we have previously noted, ought to enable man’s response to Revelation. Such a response is not possible unless through a free and personal commitment. Therefore, authentic reading of the Bible entails an education of the whole person so that he or she may freely respond to the Word of God and continue in this vital dialogue. ‘[C]atechesis must be impregnated and penetrated by the thought, the spirit and the outlook of the Bible and the Gospels’ (CT 27). The Bible itself reveals how God educated his people through his covenant. We must learn to be open and desire God in order that God may reach us and begin talking to us. Like Abraham welcoming three heavenly guests, we can receive God and his blessings with charity. Like Samuel, we can answer God’s call with ‘here I am’. Like King David, we may thank God for his gifts with prayer, love and praise. Like Mary, we can listen attentively to the Word of God, pondering it in our hearts.

Education through the Word of God is important for children’s catechesis, as the GDC strongly stresses: ‘Central aspects of the formation of children are training in prayer and introduction to Sacred Scripture’ (GDC 178). This is also relevant for adult catechesis: training in prayer and introduction to Sacred Scripture must *always* go together to ensure that a true meeting with God takes place and can transform the whole of life. The emphasis placed on prayer in the CCC is not irrelevant to the use of Sacred Scripture in catechesis. For those who are baptized, already bearing God’s gift within them, baptismal grace has established their covenant with God. Through baptism, God is present and man can answer him as a friend and a beloved child. The Bible used in catechesis with the baptized therefore gives life, growth and fullness to this relationship which has already been begun deep in the heart of man. The Word of God, drawn from the Bible, penetrating the heart and read within the

Church's living Tradition, will unify all the dimensions of one's Christian life: meditation, study, celebration, practise and witness to the Word of God.

The integration of all the dimensions of Christian life is not the work of the catechist, but of Christ himself. Even if one were to include all the aspects of faith in each catechetical session, this would not be enough. The integration must occur in the heart of the catechized person. The catechist may draw together everything necessary, but it is Christ who will transform and unify each person's heart through the Holy Spirit.

Conclusion

We now return to our opening question: How can we use the Bible and transmit this 'Word of Scripture' so that it may be a life-long source of strength and nourishment for those we catechize? Both catechists and the catechized ought to read Sacred Scripture as a Word that God addresses to us today. This task implies the simultaneous integration of systematic and organic teaching in the faith (*fides quae*) within the person's living relationship with God (*fides qua*). These bear witness to a successful transmission of and an insertion into Revelation.

It is in this way that the unity and the entirety of teaching in the faith and the life of faith provide the keys for a true understanding of the Word of God transmitted in Sacred Scripture through the Tradition of the Church. This unity and this entirety are God's work, transforming the individual's heart. Thus men become instruments of transmission of Revelation: 'You will be my witnesses...to earth's remotest end' (Act 1, 8).