

This a series on Catechesis in the Church which I presented over several weeks at the Gaudium Et Spes Institute weekly Monday Adoration from 7.15pm to 8.45pm.

Monday Adoration: May 29, 2006

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Catechesis in the Church (1)

What is Catechesis?

Catechesis is the deepening and strengthening of faith of baptized persons. It is an integral aspect of the ministry of the Word of God which begins with evangelization, the initial proclamation of the gospel. It concerns those who have already made their act of faith in response to evangelization. Catechesis presupposes faith and conversion. It is done in view of awakening, nourishing, renewing, deepening, strengthening, and education of faith which was received after initial conversion through evangelization. The faith received as a response to evangelization must be nurtured in order for it to grow to full maturity. It is the function of catechesis to foster this growth of faith in baptized persons.

Essentially, all baptized persons are candidates for catechesis because all Christians must continuously strive to grow in faith. One's faith is never static. Either, it is growing stronger or getting weaker. Oftentimes, we experience growth in faith and other times weakness in faith and even doubt. Our spiritual life is kind of like a spiral movement. If our faith is not active, it can only mean it is passive. Catechesis helps faith to be more and more alive and active. Our faith sooner or later will be cold and dead if it is not continually deepened. The ministry of catechesis ensures that the faith of Christians is thoroughly deepened. It enhances the education of faith of Christians. The ministry of imparting and strengthening the faith is the responsibility of all Christians in virtue of their baptism and confirmation which makes them sharers in the universal mission of the Church.

Aim of Catechesis

The aim of catechesis is the presentation of the Christian message in its entirety in order to continuously nourish the Christian faith and so attain maturity of faith. The education of faith and the deepening of conversion constitute the goal of catechesis. Therefore, no catechesis can take place without initial conversion. This is quite understandable with regard to adult converts. What about children baptized as infants? The Church should help young people baptized as infants first to experience conversion and a personal encounter with Christ before the process of catechesis. Oftentimes, the life of faith is presumed in young persons born of Christian parents; **they need to know the faith in a new light**. Through catechesis, they will come to have a personal encounter with Christ. The process of enhancing the faith of young people baptized as children begins in the family, which the Church calls the *domestic church*.

Catechesis in the Early Church

Catechesis has always been an integral and indispensable mission of the Church. Catechesis is the life and breathe of the Church. The Church can never be without catechesis. The importance of catechesis was demonstrated in the apostolic era when the apostles totally

devoted themselves to the cause of the gospel in accordance with the command of our Lord: “Go, therefore, make disciples of all nations; baptize them in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit and teach them to observe all the commands I gave you” (Mt 28:19-20). Catechesis found a visible expression in the early patristic era, that is, the period of the Fathers of the Church. This was evidenced in the numerous catechetical literatures of the Fathers of the Church such as the Cappadocian Fathers (St. Basil the Great, St. Gregory Nazanzien and St. Gregory of Nyssa), St. Cyril of Jerusalem, St. John Chrysostom, St. Ambrose of Milan, and the famous St. Augustine who is reputed as the greatest of the Fathers of the Church.

The thriving and flowering of catechesis reached its climax in the patristic era which produced the *Catechumenate* as a solid and profound instruction programme in the faith and initiation into the Catholic community. The *Catechumenate* was rooted in Scripture, Liturgy, and the doctrines of the Church. People who wanted to become Christians went through a period of apprenticeship with their sponsors and the love and support of the entire Christian community. Unfortunately, there was a gradual decline of the *Catechumenate* beginning from the fourth to fifth centuries when huge numbers became Christians. Infant baptism became the norm. And people were instructed later as young adults to receive the Eucharist and Confirmation.

However, one of the fruits of the Second Vatican Council is the restoration of the Catechumenate as evidenced in **The Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults** (RCIA) which was published on January 6, 1972, by the Sacred Congregation for Divine Worship. The retrieval of the RCIA was one of the remarkable achievements of the Second Vatican Council. The RCIA enables adults to embrace the Catholic faith and to make a spiritual and faith journey with the Christian community. This journey culminates on Easter Vigil when the candidate receives the Sacraments of Initiation: Baptism, Confirmation and Holy Eucharist. Following the reception of the Sacraments of Initiation is a period of post-baptismal instruction, commonly known as *mystagogia*, on the mysteries of the faith. Some of the great catechetical instructions of the Fathers of the Church such as St. Cyril of Jerusalem, St. Ambrose and St. Augustine, were addressed to neophytes during the period of their post-baptismal instruction.

Catechesis and the Nigerian Church

Since as Christians we are students of catechesis, we must avail ourselves of every available means of the Church for the deepening of our faith: The Liturgy and Sacraments, Personal and Family Prayer, Rosary, Faith Sharing, Bible Study, Praying the Scriptures, Pious Associations, Eucharistic Adoration, Retreats, Seminars, Workshops, etc. *Our Monday Night Adoration* is one of such means of deepening our faith. Many of us complain that we lose members to the Pentecostal Churches. One might ask: Who are those in the Church likely to be lost to the Pentecostals? Were they ever grounded in the faith and doctrines of the Catholic Church? What kind of catechetical instruction did they receive before they made their First Holy Communion and received the Sacrament of Confirmation? What are the catechetical methods used in parishes in Nigeria? Have religious instructors been sufficiently trained to transmit the faith to others in fruitful and effective manners? Do Nigerian Catholics take the deepening of their faith seriously? Or are they contented with attending Mass on Sunday? These are pertinent questions worth pondering by all of us. You would agree with me that we have quite enough on our plate today for reflection and sharing. *Come O Holy Spirit and fill the hearts of thy Faithful!*