

Monday Adoration: July 3, 2006
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Catechesis in the Church (4)

The Vocation of the Catechist in the Church

The image of the catechist in my home town when I was growing up still remains vivid in my mind. He was the pillar of the faith; he led us at prayers in the Church, taught us catechism, gave moral instructions, and faithfully prepared the Christians of our station for the reception of the various sacraments. He was excited when I told him I was going to the seminary. He supported me with his prayers, encouraged me, and gave me pocket money whenever I was returning to the seminary at the end of my holidays. He told me that he looked forward to the day of my priestly ordination. But this was not to be as the good Lord called him to eternal glory before my priestly ordination. My own father was a catechist; he practiced first as a part-time catechist and then practiced as a full time catechist towards the end of his life. I recall how my father would proudly tell us of his training as a catechist in Benin City from 1948-1950.

Undoubtedly, many adult Catholics have fond memories of the important role the catechist played in the deepening of their faith when they were growing up. Catechists have remained an integral part of the mission of the Church. The catechist is, first and foremost, a lay minister who is called to ministry in the Church in virtue of his baptism and confirmation. In addition, the call of the catechist comes from the Holy Spirit who entrusts him or her with specific gifts for service in the Church. However, the catechist must receive the mandate of the Bishop in order for him or her to exercise ministry both in the name of Christ and on behalf of the Church.

The Sacred Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples describes the catechist as a lay person specially appointed by the Church, in accordance with local needs, to make Christ known, loved and followed by those who do not yet know Him and by the faithful themselves. The vocation of the catechist comes from Christ Himself and confirmed by the Church. The vocation of the catechist is unique in itself; it transcends just being the priest's helper and a subordinate who carries out the priest's instructions. In its **Guide for Catechists**, which was issued on December 3, 1993, the *Sacred Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples* clearly states that: "The catechist is not a simple substitute for the priest, but is, by right, a witness of Christ in the community."

Catechists have played an indispensable role in the evangelization of the Church in Africa. The success of the missionary evangelization of Sub-Saharan Africa from the nineteenth century till the present is due to a large extent to the immeasurable sacrifice, generosity, fidelity, and commitment of catechists. They worked side by side first, with early missionary priests in primary evangelization and then, with the indigenous clergy and religious men and women in the pastoral care of the various Christian communities. In places with acute shortage of priests, catechists have worked hard to sustain the faith and the growth of the Church. The role of the catechist remains as important as ever in the Church. **Hence the vocation of the catechist should be acknowledged, respected and encouraged in the Christian community.** The **Guide for Catechists** urges priests to educate the community to respect their catechists, help them in their work and contribute to their support, especially if they have a family.

Traditionally, the catechist has been a married man to a large extent in the African Church in general and in the Nigerian Church in particular. This unsurprisingly reflects a predominantly patriarchal culture in Africa where leadership position has been the exclusive domain of men. Since the catechist is by and large a community leader in the Church, it is understandable why only married men were largely catechists. However, the call of lay people by the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council to exercise ministry in the Church in virtue of their baptism and confirmation, clearly indicates that **not only married men** are called to be catechists in the Church. As the Guide for Catechists has succinctly noted: "Catechists may be old or young, male or female, married or single, and these factors should be taken into account in assigning tasks in the various cultural settings." This shows that women, whether married or single, not only can but should be trained to become catechists if they feel they have the vocation to be catechists. It will be more beneficial to the Church in Nigeria if women who feel called to be catechists are encouraged, trained and recognized by the Church as valid and genuine catechists as their male counterparts.

In the light of the directives of the Guide for Catechists, it will be fruitful for the Church in Nigeria to promote the vocation of female catechists and train them so that among other responsibilities, they would be assigned to minister to the needs of various women's groups in the parish. The Guide for Catechists further states that: "Women would seem to be the natural choice for educating the young and working for the Christian promotion of women." One major area where female catechists will be tremendously helpful to the Church in Nigeria is the pastoral care of widows in the Church. Many Catholic widowed women have suffered indignities during the mourning period of their husbands' death. The Church should continually champion the cause of the dignity of Catholic widows who repeatedly are subjected to cultural practices that violate their dignity. The Church in Nigeria should train female catechists who would provide pastoral care to widows during their mourning period and also as spiritual directresses of the Association of widows in parishes. They should be trained as counsellors to widows during the period of mourning. The presence of more female catechists undoubtedly will be a blessing to the Nigerian Church. Hopefully, qualified female catechists eventually will become leaders of communities with spiritual responsibilities which extend beyond women groups in the Church. There are already trained female catechists in different parts of our country including the Archdiocese of Abuja. They need the recognition and support in the parish community.

Evangelization is a primary and fundamental aspect of the Word of God; evangelization is usually directed at non-Christians and non-converts. Catechesis on the other hand, is a secondary aspect of the ministry of the Word of God and it is usually directed at those Christians who have already embraced the faith. As I noted some weeks ago, catechesis is a process of awakening, nourishing, strengthening, maturing, and the deepening of one's faith. Consequently, catechesis is a life-long process since the gospel must always permeate the lives of Christ's followers. The task of catechesis is the responsibility of all Christians. However, because of the specific charism of the catechist, he or she plays a special role in the deepening of the faith of believers. Hence there is a great need to promote and appreciate the vocation of the catechist in the Church. This calls for the training of more catechists, both male and female, for the Church in Nigeria in order to meet the spiritual needs of Catholics especially those in outstations that do not regularly have priests to minister to them. May God bless all our catechists! *Amen!*

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