

Catechesis in the Church

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Preamble

It is with deep gratitude to God that I welcome you to our seminar/reflection on *Catechesis in the Church*. Catechesis has been very dear to my heart in my priestly ministry. I know that catechists and catechetical instructors are the pillars of the Church in the process of imparting the faith and helping others to grow in the faith. Hence, it is my great joy to journey with you today in order to help enrich you in your catechetical ministry. In this paper, I will examine the meaning and aim of catechesis. I also will examine catechesis in the early Church; the right to catechesis and the recipients of catechesis. I will then focus on Catechesis in the Nigerian Church. I will conclude that much needs to be done for the growth and progress of catechesis in the Nigerian 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. Catechists and catechetical instructors are largely responsible for teaching and fostering the growth of faith of members of the Christian community.

Essentially, all baptized persons are candidates for catechesis because all Christians must continuously strive to grow in faith. Catechesis and catechism is not only for those preparing to receive the sacraments but for all Christians at different levels of their faith journey. 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. But catechists and catechetical instructors have a greater responsibility in teaching the faith. Like every other aspects of the Church's life, all Christians are called to participate in the deepening of their own faith and then of others.

Therefore, catechesis is an ongoing education in the faith which leads to the gradual deepening of the faith in such a way that one is truly conformed to Jesus Christ by faith, words and actions. Catechesis is a life-long process. Baptism occurs once in a

lifetime but catechesis occurs continuously in a life time. Catechesis enables us to live fully the Christian vocation and other vocations in the Church for which one is called: priesthood, religious life, married life, single state. Thus, all the members of the Christian community must avail themselves of catechesis for the sake of the growth of their faith. Our presence here every week is one of such ways of deepening our faith and our relationship with the Lord Jesus.

2. 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*.

3. 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. That is what is still obtainable today.

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.

4. The Right to Catechesis

In his Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation on “Catechesis in Our Time,” *Catechesi Tradendae*, issued on October 16, 1979, John Paul II describes catechesis as “an experience as old as the Church.” He further states that “the Church has always looked on catechesis as a sacred duty and an inalienable right” (**Catechesi Tradendae 14**). John Paul II goes on to say that “every baptized person, precisely by reason of being baptized, has the right to receive from the Church instruction and education enabling him or her to enter on a truly Christian life” (**Catechesi Tradendae 14**). Be that as it may, it means that first, Catholics must realize the importance of catechesis and be available to benefit from what the Church offers especially at the parish level since the parish is the *locus* or setting for the practice of ministry in the Church. The life of the Church is concretized at the parish level. The complaint in many parishes is that parishioners simply don’t attend programmes that would enhance their faith: parish retreat, seminar, workshop, devotions, parish prayers, etc. The right of all Christians to receive catechesis will not materialize when parishioners do not avail themselves of the means to actualize this right. How come that Catholics respond so poorly to spiritual programmes? The overwhelming majority of Catholics are contented with attending Mass on Sunday and that is all. What does the Church need to do in order to change this trend?

5. Recipients of Catechesis

Since catechesis is a right of the baptized, they can claim such right from their pastors. According to **Catechesi Tradendae**, “All believers have a right to catechesis; all pastors have the duty to provide it” (**Catechesi Tradendae 64**). Therefore, catechesis should be a priority in parishes and should be directed towards all the groups in the Church: infants, children, the young, adults, the aged, the handicapped, etc. **Catechesi Tradendae** urges that everybody should be catechized in the Church irrespective of age groups. The handicapped are specially mentioned. They should not be forgotten in the catechetical programmes of parishes. They have a right like others of their age, to know the “mystery of faith” (**Catechesi Tradendae 45**).

From the Church’s teachings, we can see that catechesis is not only for children preparing to receive the sacraments but for all Catholics. The *onus* rests squarely on pastors to sustain viable catechetical programmes in parishes. Even if the turn out is not encouraging, pastors of souls must never relent in making catechesis available to every group in the parish. Pastors of souls should diligently dedicate their energy to effective and fruitful catechetical programmes in order for the faith of their parishioners to be alive and well and can thus stand the test of the daily vicissitudes of life. John Paul II appeals

passionately to the Church's ministers with regard to catechesis: "With all my strength I beg you, ministers of Jesus Christ: Do not, for lack of zeal or because of some preconceived idea, leave the faithful without catechesis" (**Catechesi Tradendae 64**).

6. 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. 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.

Conclusion

Brothers and sisters, as I share these reflections with you, I have a sense that so much needs to be done by the Nigerian Church in the area of catechesis. There must be an organized and systematized approach to catechesis in the Nigerian Church. We cannot just be contented with the old and routine ways of instruction in the faith. We must ask what else should be done. And there must be a good will and commitment on the part of the clergy, religious, and laity alike in order to discern and discover the invaluable varied ways of providing fruitful and effective catechesis in the Nigerian Church.

Thank you for listening. *Praise the Lord!*