

## **Catechetical Methodology: Communicating the Wonder of the Deposit of Faith**

Authored by [James Pauley, STD](#) in [Issue #29.4](#) of *The Sower*

*James Pauley asks how we can assist in the recovery of wonder at the Christian faith in a technological age.*

In the *United States National Directory for Catechesis*, the U.S. Bishops make an interesting point about the effects of the entertainment industry upon our young people in their capacity for growing in Faith. While the media certainly presents many opportunities for evangelization and catechesis, there are some important challenges which arise as well, especially when today's generations are as 'plugged in' as they are.

The bishops write:

'Most people today, but especially young people, expect learning experiences to be entertaining and tend to judge the effectiveness of those experiences on the superficial level of how entertaining they are rather than how humanly enriching or authentic they are. Young people are taught both by the excitement generated by technology and by the effervescence of popular culture to reject something if it bores them – and often the only things that do not bore them are those that seduce or titillate.'<sup>[i]</sup>

### **Virtual Living**

Every catechist who teaches people who are more and more under the influence of television, the Internet, and other communications media knows this challenge very well. Certainly there is nothing inherently evil in these various technologies, but a strong case can be made that the more time people today spend in a 'virtual' world of instant messages and entertainment, the less of an attention span they have. After all, what kind of an effect does a high number of hours a day on the Internet or in front of the TV have on our capacity to think, to imagine, and to wonder? What effect does it have on our interest in the mysteries of Faith? How does it impact our capacity for meditation and contemplation?

While catechesis revolves around the proclamation of the Good News of God's desire for communion with humanity, the modern person is unlikely to be interested in the very thing he has been created for if the capacity for wonder has been significantly dulled. Catechesis seeks to communicate the Deposit of Faith to today's generation.

### **The Recovery of Wonder**

This sacred Deposit is the 'pearl of great price' and at its center is the mystery of Christ. The fully human response to this Mystery is a response of wonder and awe and certainly once we have joined the Church triumphant for all of eternity it will be wonder which will best characterize our heavenly existence. And yet, so many today seem to have lost the capacity for genuine wonder and have therefore lost touch with a key facet of what it means to be truly human. But we should make no mistake about it: without wonder, an authentically Christian life is impossible. Can we (very, very gently) encourage our catechetical charges to exercise moderation when it comes to the amount of time they are attached to communications media in its various forms? Perhaps if we can convince them of the immensely beneficial outcome in the Catholic spiritual life, this might be a possibility. And, of course, such a plea falls on deaf ears if the one making the proposal isn't attempting this rehabilitative moderation himself.

What, then, is the 'wonder' that we so desperately need to recover? Sofia Cavalletti, the scripture scholar who founded the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd program describes it in this way:

'If we were to better clarify the nature of the stimulus man receives from wonder, perhaps we could compare it to a magnet. The nature of wonder is not a force that pushes us passively from behind; it is situated ahead of us and attracts us with irresistible force toward the object of our astonishment; it makes us advance toward it, filled with enchantment....Wonder is proper to the child, poet, artist and also to the old person who has known how to live by beholding and contemplating the world surrounding him in such a way that reality has revealed ever widening horizons to him. We can say that, according to their different levels of penetration, all is new to the child and the old person.'<sup>[ii]</sup>

When we are in wonder before something, we do not have to be pushed. We are fascinated by it, almost compelled towards it because we are drawn by its attractive quality. The object which awes us is something which, in a sense, transcends us, pulls us out of ourselves. We are very little, very humble, when we are in wonder, which is perhaps why children are oftentimes so adept at seeing the world and the things of God as they really are.

### **Learned by Example**

Wonder is the natural response to what God has done for us in Christ Jesus. Therefore, something is amiss in an era where many seem to be indifferent and bored with the Church's announcement of the truth and reality of sin and grace. How might we begin to recapture this sense of wonder which is so necessary to the catechetical mission?

The attitude of wonder is an attitude which is primarily learned by example. Certainly the level of wonder and awe present within a family is a significant influence on the children within the family. But how can a catechist begin to cultivate wonder and awe amongst catechetical participants?

Sofia Cavalletti recommends that the catechist should not 'give too many things,'<sup>[iii]</sup> that is, offer so much content that there is not time to ponder it. When faced with under-catechized generations, a catechist's natural reaction might be to try to fit in as much content as possible when teaching, in order to do one's part in a genuine cultural crisis of faith.

### **Giving Time**

The problem arises though when the content presented is communicated in a manner reminiscent of water out of a fire hose. If the catechized do not have a sufficient amount of time to ponder a particular aspect of the Faith and to see its beauty, its reasonableness, its meaning and ramifications in real life, if our student-learners are given too much content that is not sufficiently 'unpacked,' then it is quite likely that they will begin to lose interest. Cavalletti goes on to explain that, 'if the child does not have the time to dwell on anything, then everything will come to seem the same to him and he will lose all interest in things.'<sup>[iv]</sup> There is tremendous wisdom in her recommendation to 'dwell' with Christian doctrine. It's only when we are in this receptive and interested place that we indeed become hungry for more.

### **NOTES**

[i] NDC, p.16.

[ii] Sofia Cavalletti, *The Religious Potential of the Child*, Archdiocese of Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1992, p.138.

[iii] *Ibid.*, p.140.

[iv] *Ibid.*