The Ecclesial Method of Catechesis
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(Developed from “the ecclesial approach to methodology” as proposed in chapter three of The Mystery We Proclaim – Second Edition [TMWP] by Msgr. Francis Kelly, Our Sunday Visitor, Inc., Huntington, Indiana, USA, 1999)

The General Directory for Catechesis calls for a faith that “involves a change of life, a ‘metanoia,’ that is a profound transformation of mind and heart…By meeting Jesus Christ and by adhering to him the human being sees all of his deepest aspirations completely fulfilled. He finds what he had always been seeking and he finds it superabundantly” (GDC 55). Catechetical methodology must be Christocentric, creative and constantly evaluated by how effectively it invites the learner to lifelong conversion.

Because of the importance it places on the proclamation of the Gospel message and the need to cultivate a response of faith and conversion on the part of learners, we have found the ecclesial method to be an effective method.

Step 1: Preparation

Rather than personal experience as our starting point, we begin with a temporary “calculated disengagement” that helps the learner transition from the busyness of the day to a place of openness, docility to the Holy Spirit and receptivity to the truth of God’s Word.

“The catechist must help create the conditions for the possibility of a deepening of God’s Word in the hearts of those being served” (TMWP, p. 138)

Key “Environmental” Factors:

- **Physical Environment of the catechetical space** – Ensuring the space is arranged in a way that provokes curiosity and desire for God. How can we make the room “feel” like a place where God may be encountered?

- **Disposition of the catechist** – In verbal and nonverbal ways, do participants feel welcomed by the catechist? What can be done in the first five minutes to cultivate a strong rapport with participants? As am ambassador of Christ, do participants meet Christ in the catechist?

- **Building an atmosphere of trust and respect amongst your learners** – without this, it will be very difficult for learners to be open to God. With it, the capacity for genuine community is present, and they will be more likely to be attentive to the catechist.
Prayer – the “high point” of the preparation step: Catechesis beginning “in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit…”

- The catechist’s welcome and interaction with participants as well as any opening activities and discussion purposes to gain participants’ attention and prepare them for an encounter with God through catechesis. This step draws to a close with a time where genuine prayer is the objective.

- An experience of prayerful encounter is the final and climactic phase of the preparation step. Beginning with an opportunity for prayerful communion with God is necessary in inviting participants to a place of openness and anticipation of what will be communicated in the “proclamation.”

- The catechist mentors participants in the life of prayer. Catechetical prayer not only prepares them for the present time of catechesis, but also is an opportunity to form their lifelong ability for prayer. Therefore, catechetical prayer draws them to deeper confidence in praying with Scripture, with the liturgy, with music, with silence, with formal prayers, with spontaneous prayer, with Christian prayers from various cultures, with the prayers of the saints, and with prayer that arises in their own hearts. Gradually, incrementally, the catechist guides each learner to be comfortable with the immense diversity of the life of Catholic prayer.

The primary objective of this step: to help participants be focused, curious, and in a place of desire for God.

Step 2: Proclamation

- Central step of the method.

- This is the joyful, convicted announcement of the Good News. In one or two sentences, how can the heart of the content of the catechesis be expressed in a way that the learner will understand it and situate everything else they learn around this central statement?

- A good proclamation is

  - God-focused – comes from/leads to God in Christ
  - Interesting!!! [Age- and group-appropriate]
  - Short, concise, easy to remember – it will be the one thing “ringing in their ears” as they leave the catechetical setting.
    - Therefore, it must be verbally and visually reinforced
  - Internalized and understood so well by the catechist, that it is not read but proclaimed from the heart with confidence and joy

- Effective proclamations can be found or created by the catechist. Some places to search for proclamations include: the Bible [a primary source!], the Catechism, the liturgy, a textbook, the insights of the saints and contemporary Christian witnesses, and, on occasion, even from various cultural sources [movies, music, books, etc.]. Proclamations can also be adapted or created.
by the catechist. No matter how a proclamation is formulated, this step presupposes on the part of the catechist a thorough grasp of the doctrine and its implications in the Christian life.

- Some examples of proclamations include:
  - “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him might not perish but might have eternal life” (John 3:16)
  - Behold, behold, the wood of the cross, on which is hung our salvation. O come, let us adore!
  - The Eucharist is the source and summit of the Christian life – it is through the Eucharist that we are all united in Christ.
  - Lent is a springtime for our souls if we surrender to Christ the Gardener [from a former student]!
  - God’s greatest attribute is His mercy!
  - Christ came to pay a debt He didn’t owe because we owed a debt we couldn’t pay!
  - Sunday is the day the Lord has made; we must be glad and rejoice! (based on Ps118:24)
  - God is real and He has left traces of Himself all over creation so that we can come to know and love Him!
  - Christ became poor so that you may become rich!

**Step 3: Explanation**

“In the third step, in a certain sense, the catechist’s personal creativity is now more challenged and evoked so that they may help participants come to a deeper personal understanding and assimilation of the message of faith. The explanation that will be made will, of course, be always in the light of the Church’s understanding of the Word, but the catechist is challenged to find appropriate ways to ‘inculturate’ this message so that it can be adapted to diverse groups to whom it is addressed. This will be done by utilizing appropriate pedagogical and andragogical teaching/learning techniques and by tapping into cultural points of reference that can help with the understanding of the message” (TMWP, p. 143).

**Characteristics of this step:**

- Most likely the longest step in the method. Time and creativity need to be put into this step so that the learners truly can understand the meaning of what has been proclaimed.

- Active participation on part of learner is particularly important. This step requires “the active engagement of the participants, so that the relevance of the Word to their life story and to contemporary issues can be brought to
light” (TMWP, p. 143). The challenge facing the catechist in this step revolves around how to best intellectually engage participants, to facilitate active learning.

- **Both inductive and deductive learning processes involved** – Apologetics and fruitful use of memorization should be used along with storytelling, question and answer, dialog between catechist and learners, roleplaying, art, music, literature, appropriate connections to human experience.

- Learning styles and variety of multiple intelligences of learners engaged so as to elicit a full response of faith

- Frequent reinforcement of the proclamation is important, demonstrating how a clearer understanding of the content in this step helps the proclamation to be taken in.

*The primary objective: to arrive at a deeper understanding by way of active learning.*

**Step 4: Application**

“Firm and well-thought-out convictions lead to courageous and upright action” (John Paul II, *Catechesi Tradendae* 22)

The Deposit of Faith is not meant to be merely intellectualized – its delivery is meant to lead to a full response of faith, to the transformation of the individual and society. Christian conversion of heart and mind does not happen without asking the question “what are we to do?” (Acts 2:37)

How does this catechesis apply within a cultural and personal context? Relevance to six key areas of the Christian life could be explored when cultivating personal application [see the GDC 87’s “six tasks of catechesis”]:

- **Appropriation and Acceptance of the Christian Faith** – How are these truths either promoted or undermined within various cultural contexts? What do these truths mean for my personal understanding of God, of faith?

- **The Moral Life** – How are various moral emphases within the culture consistent or inconsistent with the particular aspect of the Christian worldview understood today? How does the Christian understanding under discussion impact the personal moral decision-making process?

- **Liturgical Participation** – How are these truths highlighted and celebrated liturgically? How does this doctrinal understanding impact how we approach God in liturgical prayer?
- **Encounter with God in Prayer** – How does this new understanding enhance the depth of communion possible in personal prayer? How might these doctrinal truths help us to pray in a more genuine, filial way?

- **Participation in Community Life** – How are we called to give ourselves in presence to service of others? Within the Catholic community? In various communities outside of the Catholic communion?

- **Awareness and Participation in Missionary Vocation** – How does this understanding advance our living out of our vocations as evangelists, young people, married couples, etc.? How can we be better equipped to give witness to and articulate these truths for others?

**Many are the ways this step can be done:** carefully led small group discussion, a time of silence/meditation, journaling, prayer with others, analysis of some cultural expression [filmclip, music, event description, op-ed piece, etc.], opportunities for specific resolutions for growth in holiness, etc.

In the end, what is hoped for is (1) a life of increasing personal Christian holiness and witness and (2) life orientation of deeper service to others

“Our mission is to bring the faith to today’s real world. This means being sensitive to the modern world’s concerns and also seeking to understand critically its thought patterns and language. It must be, however, our humble conviction that we have the values and truth that this modern world is actually seeking” (TMWP, p.63).

The primary objective: to create opportunities for our learners to choose to integrate faith and life.

**Step 5: Celebration**

“If the catechetical process begins in prayerful attentiveness and openness to the Word of God, I believe that it must also end in prayerful gratitude and praise to God. This attitude of thanksgiving and praise is paradigmatic for all of Christian life. We look at the ‘wonderful things’ God has done in the Creation and Redemption and are spontaneously impelled to prayer and praise.”

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spontaneously impelled to prayer and praise. This must be a major part and the climax of a catechetical process and methodology that is deeply rooted in the Church’s own faith and self-understanding” (TMWP, p. 146-147).

This final step:

- **Cultivates a spirit of praise and gratitude** in the presence of God’s Word, the *evangelii gaudium*.

- **Ends in a place of thanksgiving** and not criticism, skepticism, confusion. The aim is for the learner to leave the catechetical setting in place of peace and joy and preparedness for life’s challenges.

- To accomplish this, the catechist may choose at times explicitly to bring learners to a place of thanksgiving (for example, “the Eucharist, body and blood, soul and divinity of Christ is such a gift to us – let’s turn to the Lord in prayer and thank him now for this immense grace in our lives…”)

- The catechist may choose to creatively incorporate the *session proclamation* into prayer, bringing focus of catechesis back to the heart of the doctrine focused on.

- **Ideas to incorporate into prayer during celebration step:**
  - Liturgy of Word, liturgy of hours, a focus on liturgical year
  - Music – listening or singing
  - Prayers of gratitude and praise
  - Reflective use of symbols – cross, candle, image of Blessed Virgin
  - Perhaps moving into the church to pray or inviting learners to come up individually to receive prayers of group

**Notes/Questions/Insights:**