

THE FUTURE OF CATECHESIS: Three Claims for Leaders to Consider

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Introduction

There is a gift in “going last.” That was my position for presenting at the RCL Benziger Symposium to Explore the Future Catechesis held June 18-20, 2008 in Maryland.

My happy task was to listen to each presenter who spoke before me – Dr. Thomas Walters, Sr. Catherine Dooley, and Mr. Alejandro Aguilera Titus. From each of their presentations I formed new questions and fresh considerations about the future of this important ministry. All this was in service to my role in the proceedings of the Symposium: to elicit reflection and conversation among the Symposium participants about these presenters’ ideas and their potential to inform catechetical leadership. In the essay that follows, based on my reflections at the Symposium, I do this by identifying one important insight and forming one “claim” that I make based on

each of the three presentations. From this claim I form questions so that the catechetical leaders and ministers might consider the implications of this claim for the present and future practice of catechetical ministry in the United States.

1. *Catechetical Leaders into the Future: Will We Offer Them Snakes or Fish?*

In the first presentation Dr. Tom Walters reminds us of the gift of the social sciences in conversation with theology and catechetics – how all pastoral theology begins by understanding the pastoral situation. The pastoral situation must first be described in the clearest terms so that pastoral theologians can consider ways to address what **is**, not what we ministers imagine or hope or fear to be the pastoral situation. Walters’ work is helpful in

describing clearly what is, and asking us to imagine the implications of the sociological findings of a discipline that can inform our pastoral theological reflections today. He has shared with us the tentative conclusions and very new findings of the recently completed “Generational Survey of Catechetical Leaders.” He has named the fears and hopes of the next generation of pastoral theologians who will shape the life of the church through catechetical ministries. One important result that his work reveals is that there is a continued generation gap, and perhaps within the generation itself there is also a theology gap, like that which has been narrated by sociological studies before his. There is an undeniable divide between the generation of catechetical leaders that points to Vatican II as its defining vocational moment, and the younger generation that points to the papacy of

John Paul II as its defining vocational moment. Walters also leads us to the conclusion that the new people in the pews may think more like the Vatican II generation than like their anticipated leaders. If this is the case, then Walters predicts a breach between the thinking of the future church members and the catechetical ministers who serve them.

The potential for tension in the future church looms large, but it is not insurmountable if the church is placed in the perspective of the gospel. This anticipated gap moves beyond the community of scholars and teachers and ministers who care about catechesis. It already exists in the approaches to Catholicism as a force in our culture and within our church. And it even exists among our leaders. Well known is the open debate between Cardinals Bernardin and Law regarding the Catholic Common Ground Initiative in 1996, and the disagreement among the Catholic bishops reported in the news concerning the teaching on condoms and AIDS in 1988, and the recent differences in opinion and strategies among bishops on how to address sex abuse and cover-ups in the church. But such disagreement does not always concern large issues; even small affairs can divide the leaders, generating more heat over

nonsense than light on the gospel. Perhaps a story will illustrate this point.

This true "tale of two bishops" comes from a source in a diocese that I will leave unnamed and that has experienced a change in leadership in the last five years. Some major donors and influential leaders of that diocese held a dinner to welcome the new bishop and to honor the retiring bishop. The person who told me this story was among them. The newly named bishop was invited to pray grace before the meal. He did not begin in the usual way. Instead, he declared: "Everyone knows that good Catholics abstain from eating meat on Fridays. Even though there is meat on the menu, I have been asked to pray the blessing, and so I will." The diners stood in stunned silence. This dinner was held on a Friday in ordinary time, and thus the hosts thought it a good idea to serve meat. After an awkward moment, the meal began and the guests seemed to recover. When the meal concluded, the retiring bishop was asked to pray a benediction before the guests went their separate ways. The retiring bishop specifically complimented the hosts on the choice of menu, and in humor that could be described as at once wry and biting, he reminded

everyone that it is well known that abstinence from meat on Fridays in ordinary time has been an optional practice for nearly forty years. He added that it would remain an option for as long as he was the leader of that diocese.

The problems and insights culled from the scene are many. Two things stand out to me in hearing this story. The first point is clear: Two bishops held a spitting contest over interpreting a discipline that is a footnote in Catholic practice having nothing very substantial to do with Christian faith. The contest at dinner was neither edifying nor helpful in meeting the needs of young and not-so-young people who thirst for evangelizing catechesis. A second point that I cannot deny but wish that I could: Their spitting contest is hardly unique in Catholicism.

People of the pre-Vatican, Vatican and post Vatican II cohorts as described by sociologists (William D'Antonio among them) can be heard bickering at many a Catholic gathering. The issues at hand are as peripheral as "meat or no meat on Fridays." Anyone who reads any issue of the conservative *National Catholic Register* and the progressive *National Catholic Reporter* side by side will cull many examples of the burning tension in U.S. Catholicism

and the schools of thought that fuel it. Note that nearly all of the disagreement and acrimony concerns debate about the church, almost nothing of it is about Jesus. Laced through the debate is the rush to demonize the fellow Christian without ever asking how Christ is revealed or encountered through the point of view so tenaciously regarded as unfaithful (by the right) or unenlightened (by the left).

The story of the two bishops illustrates the tasks and the motivations of two solidly committed Catholic Christians who do not speak the gospel to each other. Sadly, I am a lot like them. Perhaps you are too, so you know of times and circumstances when your implicit love for the church and your vision for its future supplanted your attention to the gospel or your bedrock belief in the love of God poured out in Christ. I imagine that for many of us, we can recall an argument or tussle of opinion in which “our church ran over our gospel” in the rush to convince another of the worth of our way of thinking (or acting).

In light of the tale of two bishops, Walters’ narrative issues a profound challenge to catechetical leaders today. Jesus asks, Who would give a child a snake when he asks for a fish? The young people of today and

tomorrow – and their not-so-young parents, who according to the sociological studies, may suffer from catechetical neglect – seem to be asking for fish. Are we leaders giving them sustenance or poison? Are we offering them worthwhile help in knowing Christ, or intimate knowledge of intramural politics and hurts within the church?

Jesus also tells his disciples that you can judge a tree by the fruit that it bears. The litmus test for effective catechesis is conversion of heart toward the gospel. The two bishops in the story failed that litmus test. In their rush to be right there is little talk of the Lord and even less humility about what we know of God and God’s desire for us. Evangelizing catechesis is a catechesis borne of conversion, rendered by people whose lives so illumine the gospel that people of any age or theological stance are drawn to want that “something” that we churchy people call Spirit. Hopefully they find it by joining communities of faith that communicate that Spirit in a joyful and transforming way.

Walters’ presentation teaches us that the catechetical leaders of tomorrow, and the people they seek to serve, may have differing ideas about holiness. But they hold some things in common. They are

not looking for easy faith, but they are looking for genuine, whole-souled expressions of relating with Christ and moving toward the spiritual depth that such a relationship can foster and host. Whether those practices focus on fasting and mortification, or on building houses in Appalachia, on bringing the Eucharist to the homebound or bringing the homeless to shelters, people engage in these practices because they desire an encounter with the God whom Jesus calls Abba and with the Spirit that could change their life choices and life course.

In light of this, I offer the following claim for reflection and discussion.

CLAIM ONE: *The future credibility of catechetical leadership rests on a willingness to get under the surface debate about church and foster real communication about the experience of God, and to promote the same in the people of God.*

Catechetical ministry continues to suffer from the effects of a divided church in which people (especially informed people like catechetical leaders) on the Catholic “right” and Catholic “left” engage in an

ideological tug of war over how to be “faithfully” (right) or “genuinely” (left) Catholic today.

The effectiveness of catechesis in the present and future rests on getting under the ecclesiological divide that Catholic adults experience when talking about their church. The consolation as well as the task of catechetical leaders today is to create spaces and situations in which people (especially adults, but not exclusively adults) talk about deeper concerns that are worthy of real discussion: *Their relationship with God, questions about God, experience of God and the role of God in their lives, speaking about these things with competence, confidence, and freedom from fear of being wrong.*

1. What are the implications for catechetical leaders who create (or support the creation of) those spaces and situations?
2. What *practices, processes, and structures* encourage the creation of spaces and situations that foster competence and confidence in adults?
3. What are the implications for catechetical leaders who wish to support people by creating those kinds of spaces and situations in which genuinely hungry adults can talk about the things

of God (not church politics, church law or their uneasy relationship to the institutional church)?

4. What are the implications for catechetical leaders who seek to promote “evangelizing catechesis” in a divided church where Catholics are more skilled at debating about the surface features of church life than they are at sharing their faith?

II. ***Catechetical Materials: A Lesson from History and A Postmodern Question***

Sr. Kate Dooley’s historical and textual analysis concludes with a two-part message that is as timely as it is clear. First, texts are an important feature of the catechetical process and they should be carefully crafted to reflect the needs of the learner, the integrity of the message and the context of the church into which we seek to welcome people. Second, her historical analysis of the texts since the time of the late nineteenth century publication of the Baltimore Catechism yields the insight that people matter more than books. Dooley emphasizes the primary role of the catechist, and shows how the catechist’s place in the plan never really waned nor wavered in the century preceding

our own. Still, the role of the text in the learning process and the theological agenda of the authors cannot be underestimated in an historical analysis of catechetical practice since this famous little book associated with Baltimore captured Catholic imaginations.

As Dooley alludes, the catechism genre extends back into history. Some would argue that it begins with wall placards supplied in churches in the middle ages. But the story of mass-produced catechisms begins with the advent of the printing press, and their popularity is an important feature of sixteenth century Protestant reform.

Books were a rather new and excitingly accessible item in the world of Luther and the sixteenth century reformers, whose generation was beginning to feel the effects of the printing press. In his zeal to spread his theological agenda, Luther mass-produced both a large catechism for the clergy and learned people, and a small catechism with questions and brief answers for children (and illiterate adults who could memorize the questions and answers). The Catholic reformers at Trent responded in kind, commissioning the publication of a

large catechism as a reference text for clergy (published in Latin in 1566), but they did not write a small catechism for children. Catholic bishops were to debate the utility of a small catechism again in 1870, when at Vatican I some of the church leaders wanted to take up the unfinished agenda of Trent.

The floor debates about a universal small catechism that took place in the springtime of 1870 suddenly seem timely in our context. In their deliberations, the bishops at Vatican Council I rehearsed issues that are nearly contemporary in either extolling or rejecting the idea of a common text. Some of the issues they considered were; 1) The role of culture and language, 2) the migration of peoples and the instability that migration brings to the learner, and 3) the challenges of educating in faith the innocent children of inactive Catholic adults. Beneath these pastoral issues lay foundational questions concerning faith and its expression in language: How do we know we are unified in faith if we don't speak the same way, using the same words, metaphors or concepts? Yet how do we know we are vibrant in faith if all we share are uniform answers, the same words without guarantee of commonly held meaning? These nineteenth

century questions markedly carved themselves into the consciousness of the Catholic bishops from the United States of America. The Baltimore Catechism emerged as a US response by the bishops who had attended Vatican I; upon their return the bishops sought to pursue the questions raised at the first Vatican Council. In autumn 1884 at the third Plenary Council at Baltimore, the bishops commissioned a small catechism. This small catechism, known as the Baltimore Catechism, shaped the thinking of generations of Catholic children.

The role of texts is not fixed for all time; texts function differently in different eras. Mass produced books were a novel item in the sixteenth century. Not so today. Recently my University engaged in a building campaign for a new campus Library. The University held several town hall meetings to determine what people really wanted and needed in a new Library. The town meetings were occasions for my learning a lot about the present and future agenda of the "information" age in which we all live. Some faculty and students wondered aloud about the need for a library at all. Perhaps what we needed was a virtual library, one that can keep pace with the changing demands and the

array of possibilities brought forth by our link with cyberspace. Others wondered whether a Library ought to function as a meeting place for those whose research is conducted largely in individual rooms in front of lap tops or Blackberries. Still others responded that a Library should function as a kind of "village well" for a University, a place where people come not only to learn but to gather in a quasi-social way, to swap stories of the day and to be re-energized as a member of a culture that prizes learning. They reasoned that a campus needs to shore up its sense of community in a post modern world of fragmentation. All these perspectives challenged my assumptions about the role of texts and the way that texts "teach" us about knowledge. Is it fixed between two covers? Does the emergence of the Internet change our way of thinking about knowledge, given the seemingly endless new possibilities that enhance, challenge, revise, and enrich our thinking about what it is possible to know and to learn? These times are not unlike those of the Protestant reformers and the council fathers at Trent. A new medium is emerging that presents a variety of new resources for learning. As successive generations are born into a society that never lived with-

out the Internet, what is the impact on our understanding of faith formation and knowledge of a tradition?

In light of these reflections I offer a second claim for reflection and discussion.

CLAIM TWO: *Creative catechesis demands that leaders acknowledge (rather than condemn) Postmodernity and the impact it exercises on understandings of "knowledge" on an Internet-linked planet*

Postmodernity is not going away. Neither are books. One feature of the postmodern sensibility, however, concerns the ever-increasing fund of information that is now available online and even on one's cell phone. In the face of this feature of post-modernity, we are confronted with epistemological questions: What is knowledge and how do we "know" something of importance like faith/spirituality? How do we access knowledge? Is knowledge (of any given topic) exhaustible or even conclusive? In light of these concerns, how do we read "texts" (books and the vast array of media that now 'educates'

us) about faith? Baldly stated: Is the postmodern mind convinced that knowledge (more/better/revised knowledge) is always a click of the mouse away?

1. What are the implications of taking seriously the post-modern reading of "texts" and the postmodern understanding of access to knowledge about faith?
2. How might these concerns shape the practices of catechetical leaders who work to foster both intimate relationship with God AND cognitive knowledge of the faith tradition; specifically, what are the implications for catechetical leaders as they address:
 - ▶ The place of theology and "interpretive skill" in ministry education/formation of professional leaders and volunteers, so that they can interpret and evaluate the vast array of accessible "knowledge" found among many media?
 - ▶ The production and use of materials (books, DVDs and their heirs, cyber-materials, etc.) for catechetical purposes, and for individualized learning and spiritual growth in adults as well as in younger people?

III. *Catechetical Realities and Hopes: A Culturally Integrated Catholic Church*

In the final of the three presentations, Alejandro Aguilera Titus raised several important issues about the changing face of the Catholic church in the United States, especially about its ethnic composition and related questions about the relationship between faith and culture that accompany cultural shifts in church membership. As Aguilera Titus has reminded us, the newest Catholics come from the Hispanic and Asian worlds more than from the Europe of the first wave of nineteenth and early twentieth century Catholic immigration. Aguilera Titus reminded us of a truth that most of us know but we often overlook or ignore. While the face of the church in this country is daily becoming more Latino (and to a lesser extent, Asian), it is not clear that people feel welcome in the parish of the present day. Only when people are welcomed and feel honored, do they form an identity as Catholics and become involved as ministers of the gospel to the world. The tasks for pastoral leaders today include devising creative ways to reach out and welcome, and to promote a parish life that honors genuine **cultural integration**. One

of the pressing issues raised by Aguilera Titus' narrative is this:

What does it mean to be Catholic and what is Catholic *identity* in a multicultural church of various expressions of faith and of various theological approaches to Catholicism? How can we understand and present ourselves, despite these differences, as Catholics?

A catechetical challenge for Catholic communities and their leaders today is not only to promote the formation of disciples of the Lord. This is the task of all Christians. The additional challenge today is to articulate a Catholic identity not narrated from the margins of economic or civic life in America. This must be an articulated identity that accounts for the ethnic and theological pluralism of United States Catholics, a pluralism that can spawn division rather than integration.

Fresh home from being one of a few Protestant observers invited to Vatican Council II, Langdon Gilkey, a theology professor at the University of Chicago, wrote a text entitled *Catholicism Confronts Modernity: A Protestant View*. In that work he

argued that a Catholic theological worldview and anthropology differ from—and complement—a Protestant theological worldview and anthropology. Gilkey understood that each “cousin” in the extended Christian family held certain spiritual emphases based on their way of seeing the world and its people. He elaborated his thesis by naming and describing the Catholic spiritual emphases in three aspects. Despite the passing of forty years since his writing, Gilkey's observations are valuable to revisit today.

The first aspect of a Catholic spirituality is what he termed the Catholic **principle of sacramentality**. Sacramentality: The bedrock conviction that the world is charged with the grandeur of God, that earth is crammed with heaven, to paraphrase badly the Jesuit poet Gerard Manley Hopkins. For Gilkey, Catholic spirituality emphasizes the Incarnation—the “enfleshment” of God in Jesus Christ, and the revelation of God's desire to be one with humans through Christ. For Catholics, Gilkey reasoned, the Incarnation functions as the guiding force beneath a worldview and an anthropology that regard the world and people as fundamentally more graced than sinful. According to Gilkey, the key

to the principle of sacramentality is that those who hold it dear recognize and esteem the presence of the divine in the simple and the small, coming to know the truth that we are always already graced by God before our knowing it. Examples for Gilkey are found in the Catholic emphasis on liturgy and worship, on popular religious devotions, processions, prayers and rituals found in a variety of ethnic cultural expressions of Catholicism.

Gilkey further observed that sacramentality carries forward a correlative principle (his second one) of **mediation**. This second spiritual principle rests on the first, the one that affirms the Incarnation. For if God has made this commitment to humans in Jesus, then humans are the *imago Dei*, created in the image of the divine as Genesis tells us. In that story recorded in the first pages of the bible, God charges the humans in creation to be co-creators with the divine in the ongoing story of the universe. Gilkey notes a confidence that approaches audacity in the Catholic view of the human being and the human potential to touch God and to know the Holy in an analogous yet intimate way by virtue of the world, the created

order. In efforts on behalf of catechesis, we offer to people a word that will rouse their hearts and call them to responsibility for the proclamation of the good news: that God's "Word" is made flesh in Christ.

Catholics affirm the importance of mediation through sacraments as well as Word. The things of the world in which God's life is mediated are "sacramentals" for Catholics: bread, wine, water, oil, fire, blest objects, icons, symbols. But mediation – whether through God's power revealed in sacraments or through the power of humans to be stewards and co-creators of the world moving toward Christ – is not proof that God has favored us and left it to us exclusively to enjoy it. On the contrary, the Incarnation reveals God's commitment to the entire world. So the many works that Catholics engage in as Christian disciples carry a deeper meaning when considered alongside the principle of mediation. Service and charity can help to heal the world and at the same time point beyond our talent to the power, intelligence and creativity of God.

Finally, Gilkey drew attention to the third Catholic principle, that of "**communion**" as the celebration of connections that defy or at least traverse borders. He observed that

Catholic polity and Catholic piety have conspired to portray believers as the communion of saints and holy things, connected across the divide of geography, ethnicity and time. It should be noted that Protestant piety and practice are hardly devoid of these elements, but as a matter of emphasis, Gilkey saw the Catholic story as one that emphasizes connections, a result of God's commitment to be one with us, all of us.

The commitment to justice as a component of catechesis flows from the Catholic emphasis on the Divine incarnated, God within flesh and bone, history and creation. To serve faith and promote justice affirms the truth that we are connected to one another despite the surface differences and the borders that those perceived differences can spawn. The consistent ethic of life flows from this principle of communion, calling us to recognize that all life is sacred from the moment of conception to natural death. Just practices call us to look at the plight of those living without dignity and to defend the equality of all human beings, because Jesus Christ became one with us. Our humanity shows itself in particularity, a cause for joy at seeing the various mani-

festations of God's face. The surface distinctions among God's people should never be cause for injustice. Gilkey gazed like a first-cousin at Catholics who confronted modernity in the 1960's, yet his articulation of a distinctively Catholic spirituality may carry potential for further analysis of the challenges of forging a Catholic identity in post-modern America. Or perhaps new language, less technical than Gilkey's, is needed to drive home the riches of the Catholic spiritual tradition. Perhaps some other discourse about a "Catholic worldview" or a "Catholic spirituality" can capture the essence without forcing the conversation into the realm of apologetics, canon law, or sociology, in order to describe a Catholic distinctiveness without division. What Gilkey offers can be called a "reflection" on Catholic spirituality. His is not an exhaustive study of Catholic theology or law or ethics. Gilkey hoped to isolate and appreciate the distinctive "features" or "approaches" to Catholic spirituality that distinguishes it from Protestant spirituality. Because Gilkey's approach attempts to get underneath surface expressions, it holds the potential to braid a bridge between Catholics of differing theological approaches (see Claim 1 above),

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and it could help to foster cultural integration in a multi-ethnic parish or faith community.

Gilkey's categories or others like them move the conversation away from differences toward commonly held spiritual sensibilities that Catholics share. They carry the potential to host conversations that move beyond the peaceful coexistence between ethnic groups in Catholic parishes and Catholic schools. Real conversation is much needed in order to approach something like real cultural integration. The practices of particular ethnic groups are often misunderstood by those outside the group. But the members within the ethnic group may lack a way to speak of the value of a practice or custom other than to assert that it is part of their cultural heritage. It would be neither disrespectful nor impolite to ask: Why? What does the practice or custom communicate about the core Catholic spiritual emphases (of sacramentality, mediation, communion) that we all share? As parishes and schools in cities and towns become more diverse in their ethnic composition, there is a pressing need to reflect on the particular practices that express faith within various ethnic groups and to learn

from these. This is true for all cultures, but certainly for Latino culture(s) that comprise a majority of Catholic church membership today and tomorrow, as Aguilera Titus has shown. This kind of reflection could be enlightening for those within, as well as those outside, the ethnic group. This could also promote intergenerational catechesis, as elders teach the young the meaning of their customs and expressions of faith, not allowing for romanticist approaches to religious practices so much as analytical ones against common criteria of a shared Catholic identity.

In light of this reflection, I offer the following claim for reflection and discussion.

CLAIM THREE: *The future of faith formation for people of all ages in parishes/faith communities and Catholic schools in the USA requires a freshly articulated Catholic identity that can bear the weight of our multicultural make-up and our undeniable theological pluralism as Catholics.*

Catholics no longer live in the margins of American society because of

their Catholicism per se (as was the case for the first wave of nineteenth and early twentieth century European immigrant Catholics). One of the challenges at this time in the church in the United States is to freshly articulate Catholic identity in a way that is not what it once was: an identity "over against" Protestants expressed (tenaciously and perhaps resentfully) by Catholics from the margins of American economic and political life.

This fresh articulation of Catholic identity, properly constructed, could function as the common theological denominator to host the variety of theological positions and cultural expressions of Catholic faith, by helping us to narrate and critique these expressions using some common terms and criteria. Positively stated, what does it mean to be Catholic and what is Catholic identity . . .

1. . . in a nation where Catholics are not in the margins of American society (and thereby united against religious oppressors), and where Catholics marry non-Catholics in record numbers?
2. . . as a spiritual (not a sociological) category in a way that will respect ethnic-cultural expressions but also narrate and

evaluate those expressions
against some common criteria?

3. ... as a theological (not a canonical-legal) understanding of Catholicism that can be communicated (a) across the right-left divide of Catholicism and (b) across the ethnic divisions existing in some pastoral settings?

What is the role of catechetical leaders (like those gathered here) in addressing these three questions above, and what are the implications, specifically for:

- ▶ The theological education of catechetical leaders/professional ministers (not volunteers)?
- ▶ The promotion of real conversation about what cultural expressions of faith mean to those who practice them and to those who observe them from outside the culture? (not tip-toeing around cultural practices we don't understand)
- ▶ The ongoing formation of Catholic school personnel (faculty and administrators) as those schools articulate their Catholic identity?