

The Future of Catechesis: Three Claims for Leaders to Consider

*Michael P. Horan, Ph.D.
Professor of Theological Studies
Loyola Marymount University
Los Angeles, California
mhoran@lmu.edu*

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 adult 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 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?

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 on line and even on one’s cell phone. In the face of this feature of postmodernity, 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, DVD’s and their heirs, cyber-materials, etc.) for catechetical purposes, and for individualized learning and spiritual growth in adults as well as in younger people?

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 also function as the *common theological denominator* to host the variety of theological positions and cultural expressions of Catholic faith, both narrating and critiquing these expressions by use of some common 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)
- The ongoing formation of Catholic school personnel (faculty and administrators) as those schools articulate their Catholic identity?