

The Spirituality Implied by the Directory

There is no extended or formal treatment of spirituality in the *General Catechetical Directory*. Part Two does, indeed, offer insights about its relationship to catechesis. The goal of catechesis, for example, is to lead “both communities and individual members of the faithful to maturity of faith” (21). Effective catechesis promotes the intrinsic demands of such faith, namely, continuous conversion (22), the practice of charity toward God and fellowman (23), ongoing growth in the mystery of Christ (24), prayer, both liturgical and private (25), and the crowning spiritual gift of discernment (26). Certainly these are elements of Christian spirituality, but no attempt is made to present them as such in Part Two or to synthesize them into a point of doctrine in Part Three.

No. 111 in Part Six on “Catechetical Formation” is primarily concerned with doctrinal and methodological education and only mentions, almost as an afterthought and in the manner of a “pious corollary,” that the catechist should cultivate a “fervent sacramental and spiritual life, the practice of prayer, and a deep feeling for the excellence of the Christian message and for the power it has to transform one’s life.” The same number singles out the virtues of charity, humility, and prudence as particularly necessary in this area of pedagogy where the principal teacher is the Holy Spirit (114).

A superficial impression, therefore, is that spirituality is not a chief concern of the document. More importantly, the *Directory* seems to consider the spiritual life as a lesser necessity for the catechist since it puts this factor in the last place among the necessary qualifications for potential catechists, after “talent” and “doctrine” (115).

But this impression is a false one. If the GCD is short on statements about

spirituality, it is profoundly spiritual in its orientation. It develops a theory of catechesis that begins and ends with Christian experience. Thus it is very deeply concerned with spirituality, since in this context spiritual and experiential are practically synonymous terms.

Spirituality, as understood in this article, is the experience of the gospel. It is the personal response to God’s self-communication in grace. More precisely, it is the effect of God’s life in the human spirit. As a science, it investigates the conditions and effects of growth in the Spirit. Multi-disciplinary in its sources, spirituality addresses man’s total life from the viewpoint of his ultimate meaning and value and the inner resources he has at his disposal to achieve his destiny. As an art, it is concerned with identifying God’s presence in concrete circumstances and facilitating the outpouring of God’s Spirit in man. Man himself is a spirit created and redeemed in Christ; he reaches his full potential by becoming at once more human, like Christ, and more divine, that is, “en-Spirited.” Spirituality delineates this process. Doctrinal formulations about God and man or abstract ethical principles are a presupposition and consequence of this experience and belong to theology rather than spirituality.

Spirituality, then, is the sum of inner attitudes that find expression in the Christian life. It is personal and subjective, deals with the ambiguities that result from the presence of both sin and grace in the present age, emphasizes dynamic and developmental factors, and strives to take into account the changing patterns of culture and other variables that make real life both challenging and fascinating. An example drawn from the GCD itself illustrates this concept:

...Catechesis should teach the aged to have supernatural hope, by virtue of which death is considered a crossing over to true life and as a meeting with the divine Savior. In this way old age can become a sign of the presence of God, of immortal life, and of the future resurrection. This will, indeed, be an eschatological witness that the aged can bear by their patience toward themselves and toward others, by their benevolence, by their prayers poured out in praise of God, by their spirit of poverty and the trust they put in God (95).

Thus the goal of this catechesis is the complexus of qualities that dispose the aging Christian to respond to God at this particularly critical moment of his life. It attempts to help him to be free enough, loving enough, strong enough to accept the diminishments of life as well as its fullness, to be at peace with himself and to be a prophet of a better hope in the community. Only one who has assimilated the paschal mystery so deeply that he instinctively lives in the present moment of his existence, dying to what is not of God and living for God and his brothers, could perfectly fulfill this challenge of old age.

Thus we can say that the GCD is a guide to a spirituality, not explicitly, since the primary intent is to supply theoretical principles of catechetics (Foreword), but implicitly, because catechesis is presented as a service of the word to function in developing a total response to the gospel in the real life of our time. The Directory moves on the level of spirit and life, and not on that of pure academics and theory.

Each Part of the document reveals an experiential thrust. Part One shows how the ministry of the word is rooted in the existential situation of the world today; it must, for example, "uncover, purify, and develop the automatic values" in current cultures (5), thus showing a healthy realism and adapting its methods and emphases to the situation. At the same time the ministry of the word must render concrete the witness of a living faith, purified and renewed, that would interest the disaffected and the indifferent.

Such adaptation supposes a fine spiritual discernment, while the renewed faith supposes a personal spiritual development.

Part Two places the ministry of the word in the framework of God's continual self-communication in Christ through both past and ongoing revelation. Catechesis endeavors to nurture the initial response of man to the fullest possible expression of faith in all areas of life. The emphasis is on formation rather than information. Catechesis is thus an interpretation of life, a blueprint for living, especially appropriate for adults, since they can give a fully mature response (20).

The emphasis does switch to the theological in the examination of the objective content of the faith discussed in Part Three. This Part is more theoretical and abstract, but even here the goal is life and growth (37). The spiritual thrust is manifested in the criteria for the selection of content for instruction (Chapter 1). The catechetical approach is personalist, Christocentric, paschal (44), and contemporary. The contemporary aspect seems to suffer in this chapter, in that there is little emphasis on the contemporary experience. This lacuna is filled, however, in Part Four, where the inductive method is preferred and experience recommended as the atmosphere for catechetical inquiry, with doctrinal formulas serving as guideposts and summaries (72-73). The centrality of Christ is illustrated in the treatment on creation (51-52), which takes its cue from contemporary theology, and in the consideration of original sin (62), which is open and heuristic. Both these doctrines can be integrated positively into a one-world concept of incarnational spirituality.

Parts Four and Five are mainly concerned with questions of educational psychology applied to the area of catechetics. Here the disciplines of psychology and spirituality form a counterpoint. Both help create the conditions for a fruitful reception of the Word of God. The role of catechist is that

of an instrument and not the principal cause of grace; yet his personal qualities are far more important than pedagogic techniques (71). The same inter-actional principle is illustrated in the case of infants learning from their parents as by “osmosis” (78). Here as in the other parts of the *Directory*, catechesis is a complex inter-relationship between human factors and divine pedagogy. It is a lifelong process of assimilation of the reality of God’s love, a growth from death to life in Christ. It leans on the behavioral and theological sciences, but its vistas are its own, the full maturation of the Christian in Christ.

The goals of catechesis, then, are unmistakably existential and experiential. The means too are equally spiritual. If the catechist is to lead persons or groups into the experience of the Christian life, he must have first traversed the way himself. Otherwise he is “a noisy gong, a clanging cymbal” (1 Cor. 13:1).

Is it a mistake that a spirituality for the catechist is not spelled out in the document as part of the preparation for the task? The pious exhortations in No. 14 are obviously inadequate. But if it is a fault, it is a *felix culpa* that no spirituality as such is developed in these pages. Any attempt to structure a spirituality for catechists would be premature. What is needed is the internalization of the whole gospel message that is set down in the *Directory*. In this effort the same liberty must be afforded the catechist to choose a particular practice just as he is allowed to order his materials and present the message to others. This leaves intact the necessity of a serious spiritual discipline for personal Christian development.

Catechesis seeks a living understanding. Without the effort to live the faith, there is nothing to impart. This is not to say that the assimilation of the Word of God must be complete and perfect before the catechist engages in this apostolate. But he must be seeking to hear this word and to make a personal response to the love of God shown in Christ Jesus before he presumes to teach others. He must have experienced the power of God’s word if he would convince others that the Lord lives and acts in us now. Without the experience of “the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of his suffering” (Phil. 3:10), the catechist can hardly do more than transmit to his students a lifeless version of Christianity.

The document might have given more direction to catechists if it had suggested opportunities for recognizing and accepting “experiences” of the paschal mystery in their own lives. The old ways of piety, recommended in No. 114, remain valid, yet the invitation might also have been issued to go further and to judge one’s life and work in the light of Jesus Christ, who died for us and is risen from the dead.

But the *Directory* does indicate one very direct way of implementing the paschal mystery in the catechist’s work: by accepting the twofold labor of careful preparation—through continuing formation (110) as well as for immediate tasks—and sincere prayer (71). This acceptance sets up the mysterious and fruitful tension between grace and free will, between divine gift and human effort. This kind of dedicated and prayerful teaching is true catechesis, and it is spiritual in its very roots.