

Noëlle Le Duc and Her Pedagogy: Serving the Child's Act of Faith

Part I

By Waltraud Linnig

Noëlle Le Duc, a member of the Carmelite secular institute Notre Dame de Vie, was a pre-school and kindergarten teacher who worked with three to seven-year old children, in order to awaken their faith. Her work with children formed a foundation for the later development of the Come, Follow Me program. She believed that even very young children can enter into a lively personal relationship with God and live this out through prayer, as well as in all the dimensions of human life. This relationship grounds catechesis and allows it to bear lasting fruit. In this article,¹ we will begin to examine the baptized child's capability for a dynamic relationship with God.

A Powerful Inspiration at the Beginning

Before we examine Le Duc's contributions, we must first understand the Carmelite founder of the Notre Dame de Vie Institute she entered in the 1950s, Ven. Fr. Marie-Eugene of the Child Jesus, whose cause for beatification is currently being examined. Fr. Marie-Eugene was a spiritual master, who highlighted especially the treasures that come with baptism. Fr. Marie-Eugene believed that catechesis must not only teach the truth about God, but it also has to "give the sense of God"² and to teach people how they can "put into practice" the capacities given by grace. He thus explains what the catechist must do: the catechist has to awaken the child to all the supernatural realities present in his soul; therefore, it is necessary to teach the child how to put the theological virtues into practice.³ Then the catechist must foster in the child the habits inscribed in the depth of his soul, where the reflexes that guide human nature are mainly to be found. The purity and the simplicity of the child increase his capacity to put into practice this "supernatural organism" of the theological virtues and the gifts of the Holy Spirit that are integral to the working of baptismal grace. The catechist has to teach the child how to find God, to have regular personal encounters with him, and to remain in his presence. Thus faith becomes keener and penetrates more deeply into God. In this way the child acquires incomparable spiritual riches that will benefit him his whole life.⁴ Emphasizing the act of believing, Fr. Marie-Eugene challenges catechists: what pedagogy can bring children to God and help them adhere to him in faith? How can the catechist help them discover God as

a living and loving person, whom we can trust and who wants to enter into dialogue with us?

During the twentieth century in France, catechesis became more difficult because of secularization and the rapid decline of Christian life in French society. From this context, Noëlle Le Duc started her pedagogical research. She held the conviction that, even before the age of reason, young children can put their baptismal grace into practice and enter into a real dialogue with God. "I had to find out how little children can start to know about God's Mystery."⁵ If young children acquire their first knowledge through the senses, though, how can we speak to them about God whom they can neither see, nor hear, nor touch? We have to find a way to introduce them into the invisible world of God's mystery, starting from visible realities and respecting their limited capacity. "What age-appropriate language must we use that is both simple and true?"⁶

The Word of God and the Child

Insights from Fr. Marie-Eugene are helpful here. Relying on Saint John of the Cross, he explains how the human person begins to believe: "The faith of children must be nourished by the Word of God."⁷ The Word of God in all its dimensions⁸ allows us to enter into Divine Revelation, into the invisible world of God. This Word of God is present in a very special way in Sacred Scripture and transmitted by the Church in its dogmatic teachings, its liturgy, and its whole life.

How can we best offer God's Word to children? The *faith* of the child is like the faith of an adult person; through the revealed Word of God, it needs to discover God Himself. The child's mind easily accepts the mystery of God. We must help the child get used to the mystery of the whole truth that God and the Church offer.

The child will keep in his soul the memory and the impression of this profound and nourishing contact with God.⁹ The human person, in order to believe, needs to hear the Word of God proclaimed. Through his Word, God invites us to enter into a loving exchange with him. The Second Vatican Council affirms this in *Dei Verbum*, the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation: in his love, God chose to reveal himself, and he made sure, through the inspiration and assistance of the Holy Spirit, that the Church faithfully transmits his Revelation. This shows

the importance of the proclamation of the Gospel (*kerygma*) in catechesis. When we receive the Word of God, we welcome the gift of God himself. The "divine realities"¹⁰ revealed by God are really present in the Word of God, written and transmitted by the Church, and they act through this Word. Receiving it we encounter God himself.

It is not enough to hear or understand the Word of God. It is necessary to accept and adhere to it. This acceptance is made possible by faith, thanks to the dispositions God gave us in baptism: the theological virtues and the gifts of the Holy Spirit. The child's faith is as supernatural as the faith of an adult person. To put our faith into practice demands an activity of our intelligence and our will,¹¹ but the act of faith is essentially supernatural.¹²

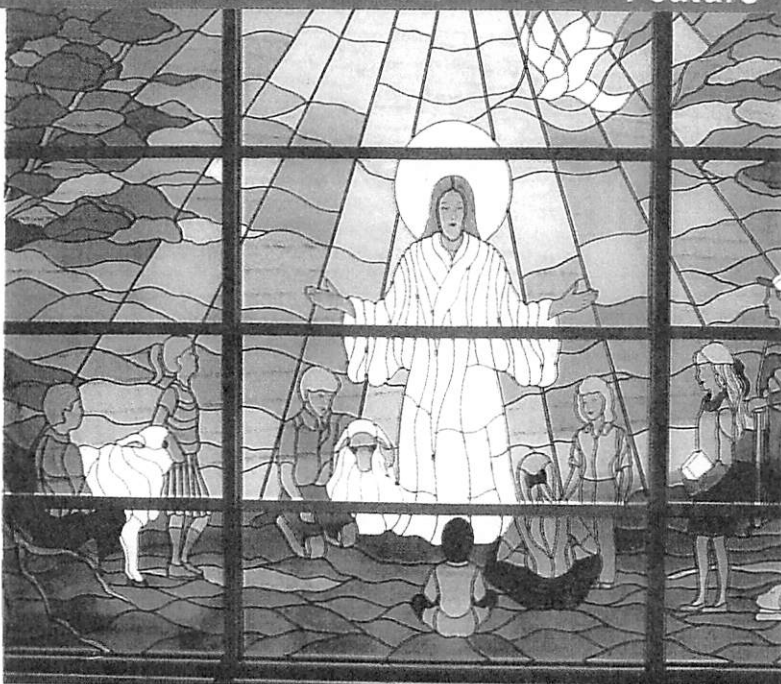
Welcoming the Word of God

Noëlle Le Duc experienced how young children are able to welcome the Word of God when it is expressed in simple and true language. Understanding the whole content of the proclaimed faith is not the most important thing. What matters most is to receive, through the Word of God, the divine reality present in the transmitted Word. Adhering to it, children adhere to God Himself, who addresses them in love. Therefore, the pedagogical work with young children need not produce first an intellectual understanding of the truths of faith. These truths must be expressed in an age-appropriate manner so they may be readily received by the child who can then make an act of faith and love, which establishes real contact with God Himself.

Young children adhere to the Word of God not because they understand it, but because they trust the person who is teaching it. The witness of the adult person is thus essential for the child's faith. Adults are witnesses of the truth and love of God by the way they speak and live. They need to be credible and worthy of the trust the child spontaneously gives them. What a challenge to all educators!

The *kerygma* guides the child to prayer that is a real encounter with God. "We saw clearly that prayer is an essential part of this first religious education because God, through His Holy Spirit, reveals himself to the child's heart, and teaches it the mysteries of faith."¹³ We have to start, therefore, by teaching children that turning one's heart to God the Father who loves us, to God who is love, is the essential part of prayer. We can neither see nor hear him, but he wants to reveal himself in our faith. We must thus keep ourselves in his presence; we must open our hearts in order to receive him.¹⁴ Fr. Marie-Eugene confirms this:

Do not say that the young child has a prayer inferior to that of the adult. Yes, perhaps its human activity is much simpler: the child does what his



capacities allow him to do. However, the activity of the child's supernatural organism is already very elevated and very efficient.¹⁵

This is the heart of Noëlle Le Duc's practical pedagogy: putting into practice the pedagogical conditions that foster the child's act of faith.

Dr. Waltraud Linnig teaches fundamental moral theology and introduction to the Bible in the Studium of Notre Dame de Vie. There she is also involved in the pastoral formation of priests and in the formation of catechists, in connection with the program Come, Follow Me.

Notes

- 1 An adaptation of Waltraud Linnig's article, "Noëlle Le Duc, Une pédagogie pratique au service du 'croire,'" in Henri Derroitte, *Les grandes signatures de la catéchèse du XX^e siècle à nos jours, Les Fondamentaux 4, Tome 2* (Brussels: Lumen Vitae, 2014), 403-413. English translation by Arnella Francis Clamor and Teresa Hawes.
- 2 Fr. Marie-Eugene, OCD, unpublished lecture, September 1966.
- 3 The theological virtues are dispositions or means inscribed in our baptismal grace that are given by God to help us attain communion with him. They "adapt man's faculties for participation in the divine nature: for the theological virtues relate directly to God. They dispose Christians to live in a relationship with the Holy Trinity. They have the One and Triune God for their origin, motive, and object" (CCC 1812).
- 4 Fr. Marie-Eugene, OCD, unpublished lecture, July 1961.
- 5 Noëlle Le Duc, May 17, 2003 lecture in Zsambek (Hungaria), cited in Thomas Labarrière, *La catéchèse sous l'action de l'Esprit Saint, à l'école de Marie: Recherche théologique sur le renouveau de la catéchèse, à l'écoute des enseignements du Pape Jean-Paul II, Dissertationes theologicae 3* (Madrid: Publicaciones de la Facultad de Teología San Dámaso, 2007, 980).
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 Fr. Marie-Eugene, OCD, unpublished lecture, September 1961.
- 8 Cf. Benedict XVI, Apostolic Exhortation *Verbum Domini*, arts. 6-21.
- 9 Fr. Marie-Eugene, OCD, unpublished lecture, September 1961.
- 10 Cf. *Dei Verbum*, arts. 2, 7, 8, 11, 17.
- 11 Cf. *Dei Verbum*, art. 5.
- 12 Cf. Fr. Marie-Eugene of the Child Jesus, OCD, *I Want to See God and I Am A Daughter of the Church: A Practical Synthesis of Carmelite Spirituality*, Vols. I and II, trans. Sr. M. Verda Clare (Chicago: FIDES Publishers Association, 1953).
- 13 Noëlle Le Duc, May 17, 2003 lecture, in Zsambek (Hungaria), *op.cit.*, 981.
- 14 Ibid., 983.
- 15 Fr. Marie-Eugene, OCD, unpublished lecture, January 1959.