

ACQUIRING THE FATHER'S EYES:

THE *Spirituality* OF THE *Catechist*

By Elizabeth Siegel

What is the most important element in the catechetical process? Is it the doctrine to be passed on? Is it the method one employs? Is it the catechist's preparation or the ability to adapt to the age and culture of the students? These are all essential, as the *General Directory for Catechesis* reminds us. These elements, however, depend on one indispensable and often overlooked factor: the spirituality of the catechist. Why is this so? Unlike subjects in the arts and sciences, the Christian faith cannot be adequately passed on unless the catechist *lives* that faith—unless it has penetrated his very being and transformed him from within. When this happens, he is no longer merely a teacher, but a living witness to something beyond himself. Like John the Baptist, he points to another, to the Lamb of God. The *Guide for Catechists*, a wonderful document about catechesis in mission territories, puts it this way: "The work of catechists involves their whole being. Before they preach the Word they must make it their own and live by it. The world... needs evangelizers who speak of a God they know and who is familiar to them, as if they saw the Invisible."¹ The catechist, in fact, invites those he catechizes to share in the communion he himself has with Christ as a member of his body, the Church. Echoing St. John's words in his first epistle, catechists can say: what we have seen and heard we proclaim to you, "that you may have fellowship with us, and our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ" (1 Jn 1:1-3).

A catechist does not merely impart a body of knowledge, therefore; his catechesis "form[s] the personality of the believer."² The catechist offers his students an "apprenticeship of the entire Christian life."³ The students will acquire from him a way of being, an attitude, a way of relating to the world. Those who have children know that they are deeply affected not only by the content of the words we speak, but by how we speak those words, by how we act, and by our attitudes, in a word, by how we live. *Who am I?*

What gives me joy? What do I love? How do I respond to weakness, to poverty, to sickness, to sin? How do I look at other people in the world? All these fundamental attitudes are conveyed when we catechize. Do our students learn from us what it means to be a Christian?

A profound example of the spirituality of the catechist

During my graduate studies in theology, I met a remarkable woman named Margaret Turek, whom I consider a quintessential teacher of the faith. She taught me how to be a catechist in my very first assignment, and much more: she taught me what it means to be a Christian. When Margaret taught, she spoke from prayer, and in a spirit of prayer. When she spoke of the Paschal Mystery, for example, she would

turn to the crucifix on the wall and you sensed by her voice that she was glorifying her crucified Lord as she spoke. When she taught of the love of the Father, her words revealed an intimacy with him: she had known his mercy, his accompanying love, and providential care in her life. In the way she taught doctrine, Margaret introduced me



St. John the Baptist
by Leonardo da Vinci (c. 1513-16)

neither feel, nor hear, nor see. The child learns to follow God's mysterious and invisible action in his or her heart without feeling it and, at the same time, to live a personal relationship with God in prayer and all throughout the day. Even a young child can attain these depths of faith.

How can we assure the integrality of faith? Not by teaching quantities of "truths," but by teaching the fundamental truth of faith. This means that, by first giving a simple knowledge of faith, you can help children adhere to the whole mystery of God. *Porta Fidei* affirms this:

Knowledge of faith opens a door into the fullness of the saving mystery revealed by God. The giving of assent implies that, when we believe, we freely accept the whole mystery of faith, because the guarantor of its truth is God who reveals himself and allows us to know his mystery of love.¹¹

According to Noëlle Le Duc, a three-year-old child is not yet able to give a personal assent to God; at that age, children are simply carried by the faith and the prayer of their parents. A four or five-year-old child can receive an initial simple teaching concerning God's love and enter into personal prayer. "Turning one's mind and heart to God is already prayer," she says.¹² The child is even able to understand that God is "Spirit." Noëlle Le Duc explains:

The disposition to find God "in spirit" from the beginning of the child's spiritual life on, constitutes for the child an essential and living foundation. The child is rooted in God, in the invisible God, and God Himself will accompany the child's growth. God's presence will be in the center of the child's whole future.¹³

Six-year-olds can progressively deepen their knowledge of God and their prayer. The catechetical curriculum proposes the same stages each year so that the children's progress according to their age can be compared to a spiral,¹⁴ which takes up the previous stages, and deepens them according to the gradual growth of the children.

In 1978, Noëlle Le Duc started publishing the results of her experience in several books, which spread knowledge of her practical pedagogy, first in France, then in other countries (Lithuania, Hungary, Lebanon, Senegal, Canada, Switzerland, Belgium, Germany, Poland, Spain, etc.) where she gave formation sessions for catechists. The contact with other cultural and ecclesial sensitivities, as well as with people of different Christian denominations, verified the soundness and the universality of this spiritual formation for children. Indeed, Le Duc's method works with children because it is extremely simple and centered on the essential.

As Le Duc's students grew up, their parents asked the catechists to continue their children's spiritual faith formation and to prepare them for their First Confession and

First Communion.¹⁵ Others requested that their children be prepared for Baptism with the same practical pedagogy.¹⁶ It became necessary to continue the Christian formation for children aged seven to eleven years old¹⁷—which is the origin for the *Come Follow Me* program—and to adapt Noëlle Le Duc's books for young children to the new situations of the present.¹⁸ The work of adapting and developing this practical pedagogy continues today—along with the deeper theological and academic reflection on catechesis that takes place at the Studium of Notre Dame de Vie in Venasque, France.

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Notes

- 1 This is a phrase from the French catechetical theorist, Joseph Colomb. Cf. Gilbert Adler et Gérard Vogeleisen, *Un siècle de catéchèses en France: Histoire – Déplacements – Enjeux* (Paris: Beauchesne, 1981), 201.
- 2 Hélène Lubienska de Lenvail, *Le Silence: À l'ombre de la Parole*, Collection Bible et Vie Chrétienne (Casterman, 1955, 1965), 90-91.
- 3 Cf. Marie Fargues, *La Formation religieuse des enfants*, in COLLECTIF, *Au seuil de la théologie: Initiation en trois années, Premier degré* (Paris: Cerf, 1960), 403. See also Rose-Marie de Casabianca, *L'Enfant capable de Dieu: Développement psychologique, éveil spirituel avant trois ans* (Fayard, 1988).
- 4 Noëlle Le Duc, *La découverte du mystère trinitaire dès l'enfance*, dans COLLECTIF, *Transmettre la foi: À la lumière du Catéchisme de l'Eglise Catholique – Rencontre spirituelle et théologique*, 1993 (Venasque: Édition du Carmel, 1994), 294.
- 5 Cf. *Dei Verbum*, art. 5.
- 6 Saint John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation *Catechesi Tradendae*, art. 72. *Catechesi Tradendae* continues: "Catechesis, which is growth in faith and the maturing of Christian life towards its fullness, is consequently a work of the Holy Spirit, a work that He alone can initiate and sustain in the Church."
- 7 Noëlle Le Duc, *La rencontre avec Dieu dès la petite enfance*, unpublished lecture given in Lyon, January 1979.
- 8 Cf. P. Marie-Eugène de l'Enfant-Jésus, OCD, *Je veux voir Dieu*, 9^e éd. (Toulouse: Éditions du Carmel, 2014).
- 9 The text also emphasizes the ecclesial character of the Christian experience. Cf. *Texte national pour l'orientation de la catéchèse en France et principes d'organisation* [National Text for the Orientation of Catechesis in France and Principles of Organization] (Paris: Coédition Bayard/Centurion/Fleurus-Mame/Cerf, 2006), 63-64.
- 10 Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, "Sources and transmission of the faith," in *Communio* 10, No. 1 (Spring 1983): 17-34.
- 11 Benedict XVI, Apostolic Letter *Porta Fidei*, art. 10.
- 12 Noëlle Le Duc, *La découverte...*, *op. cit.*, 300.
- 13 Noëlle Le Duc, *La rencontre avec Dieu...*, *op. cit.*
- 14 This is an important idea of Joseph Colomb.
- 15 Cf. Maguy Bagnol, *Je veux demeurer chez toi* (Venasque: Éditions du Carmel, 1990).
- 16 Cf. Suzette Lacombe, *Tu seras pour moi un fils* (Venasque: Éditions du Carmel, 1997).
- 17 Benoît Caule and Anne-Marie Le Bourhis published four books between 2007 and 2012 in the Collection *Come Follow Me* with a little guide for catechists [*Petit guide du catéchiste*] (Éditions du Jubilé, 2007).
- 18 Cf. Véronique Tellène, *Enfants louez Dieu* [Children, Praise God], Collection *Come and Follow Me* (Éditions du Jubilé, 2011).

Holy Spirit is “a teacher within, who, in the secret of the conscience and the heart, makes one understand what one has heard but was not capable of grasping.”⁶

Consequently, in order to receive integral catechetical instruction in the faith, children especially need to know how to encounter God. By helping children get into the habit of prayer and following the interior impulse that draws them to the Holy Spirit, we facilitate and enrich this encounter. Noëlle Le Duc gives us the profound reason for this:

It is the Holy Spirit in the child who enables him to go beyond the exterior formulations of faith, and to reach the “gold of the substance” within. A conclusion immediately follows: “Prayer and a living experience of God precede and sustain all forms of catechesis.”⁷

Because young children are open and trusting, God can easily reveal himself to them and act in their favor. We can now pose some questions: *How does God work in*

Conference in 2006, defines the Christian “experience of God” by linking these two aspects: genuine contact with the reality of God and an inner personal reception of this reality by the human person.⁹ Christian experience is a living knowledge of the mystery of God that produces a new life with God. Irreducible to purely subjective experience, the experience of God brings us back to the objective deposit of faith. Pope Benedict XVI, then Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, underlined this principle in his well-known teaching, entitled “Sources and transmission of the faith,” given in 1983 in the context of the catechetical crisis in France.¹⁰

Furthermore, the “experience of God” is an experience of God’s transcendent mystery, in which some experiences of faith remain unconscious and we become aware of them only through seeing their effects in our lives. For example, in her Christmas 1886 conversion, St. Therese of Lisieux was not aware of the grace she had received during Mass but became aware of it later, in the staircase at home. There



the human person? What is God doing in us? Are there some constant aspects of his action? Is it possible to attract his action? Noëlle Le Duc’s practical pedagogy seeks to favor God’s action in the child and then to educate the child to correspond to God. This pedagogy parallels the rich writings and teachings of Venerable Marie-Eugene of the Child Jesus.⁸ This fidelity to God leads the child to enter into an authentic *experience of God*.

Noëlle Le Duc’s pedagogy presupposes a correct understanding of what an “experience of God” exactly is. What do we mean when we say “religious experience” or “Christian experience”? The *National Text for the Orientation of Catechesis in France*, published by the French Bishops’

she discovered that she was able to react differently to her father’s impatient remark. She realized the effects of grace; her inner transformation had already been accomplished. We see that the “experience of God” is mysterious. Noëlle Le Duc’s pedagogy strives to bring children to an experience of faith that respects God’s mystery, his will of salvation, the personal grace of each person, the way God acts with each person in the history of salvation, God’s freedom, and our free response to God. In a catechetical course, the child learns to respect all aspects of the divine mystery. He can learn not to reduce his own experience of God to what he feels or to what he is conscious of. The act of faith welcomes God’s mysterious action, which we can

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

Part 2

By Waltraud Linnig

Noëlle Le Duc, while looking for ways to awaken the faith in young children, identified two important aspects of catechetical pedagogy. We shall use the terms, "fidelity to man and fidelity to God."¹

Fidelity to Man

The first aspect, fidelity to man, leads us to ask, *how do we address children?* In order to answer this question, we must take several points into consideration. First, we must remember that the human capacities of the children are still limited; in order to receive and adhere to the Word of God, they need to learn self-control, silence, how to listen, and so on. Young children, moreover, are still close to God, who is their origin and their Creator. Children are also innocent, although, like all of us, they are still marked by original sin. Finally, religious education must also consider that every child is unique and free.

Noëlle Le Duc was not a scholar, but she was given a strong pedagogical and catechetical charism. Her practical pedagogy is not a result of academic research but is the fruit of her personal experience, enriched by the efforts of a group of educators and elementary school teachers. Her experience aligns with the research done by specialists in psychology, pedagogy, and children's catechesis. These specialists helped her take into account all the aspects of the child's education and to elucidate the particular aspects of her own pedagogy.

For example, Noëlle Le Duc would refer to Maria Montessori, who described the great receptivity of children aged three to six years old as the "the absorbent mind." Children are also able to remain in silence and to recollect themselves in the presence of God, as Hélène Lubienska de Lenwal explained in her writings. This Montessori educator said that young children could be compared to contemplatives:

[My] observations obliged me to recognize that lots of children are naturally contemplative. If their capacity for attention is not developed, it is because they lacked the favorable conditions. It must be the same in the order of grace.²



Noëlle Le Duc deepened de Lenwal's observation concerning grace. She observed that in her experience, children are able to receive supernatural contemplation and that it is possible to educate them to prepare themselves and to conform to the gift of contemplation when God offers it.

Noëlle Le Duc was also inspired by the writings of Marie Fargues, who outlined the basic elements of religious education for children: the importance of an atmosphere full of trust, the witness of the teachers' faith, and the use of engaging methods. Fargues observed that religious education that seeks to bring others to a personal and free encounter with God really needs an engaging pedagogy.³ Noëlle Le Duc emphasized, in contrast to Fargues, that the child's activity is actually closely dependent on God's activity and that in prayer and in the dialogue of loving faith between God and the child, God has the first place. Le Duc stressed that faith is always a response to the gift of God and is sustained by him. She further explained that the child's activity is even more sustained by grace than an adult's because they have a simpler and purer heart. The human faculties of children are also not yet fully developed, so they are almost never a hindrance to supernatural activity. Children have to learn to act with their human capacities in order to receive and to conform themselves more and more to the action of grace coming from God.

Fidelity to God

We come now to the second important aspect of Noëlle Le Duc's pedagogy, fidelity to God—its particular strength compared to other practical pedagogies known during her time. She claimed that, in the case of very young children, the teacher's action should be directed, not to the intelligence of the children, but to the Holy Spirit himself, dwelling within each child. The Holy Spirit has been at work in us since our baptism in order to make of us children of God.⁴ Her approach corresponds to a fundamental teaching of the Christian faith: that God's action is primary.⁵ The