

TEACHING THE WAY OF GOD IN TRUTH

'Teacher, we know that you are true, and teach the way of God truthfully.' (Matthew 22:16)

The Nature of Religious Life

Pope John Paul II's post-synodal exhortation *Vita Consecrata* (1996) is now the best point of reference for a reflection on the vocation to catechesis within the context of religious life. The exhortation is in three main parts, concerned with the confession of the Trinity, the sign of communion, and the service of charity. Religious life, the Pope says, is the icon of these things, realizing for the whole Church a total dedication to contemplation, communion and mission. The work of catechesis also finds its deepest theological and spiritual meaning in relation to contemplation, communion and mission.

The Trinity as the Source of our Catechesis

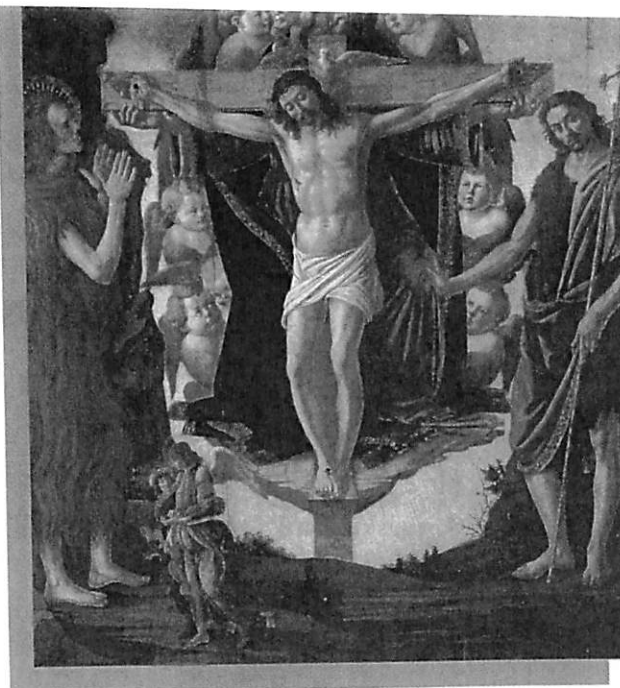
A properly Christian understanding of any profession or occupation requires that we refer it to the Blessed Trinity, the communion of life and love that God is. All gifts, ministries and services find their ultimate significance in the mutual presence, communion and giving of the Persons of the Trinity. This mystery, revealed to us by the Son in the Holy Spirit is the source from which we draw our understanding of Christian life. This presence, communion and giving flows from the Father into the Church through the Son and the Spirit giving rise to myriad forms of religious life, Christian ministry and charitable care.

From Truth to Salvation

In Mark 6:34 we read that Jesus, on seeing the needy crowd, was filled with compassion for them 'and began to teach them many things'. 'This is eternal life', Jesus says in John 17:3, 'that they know you the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent'. Their need is for life, and that life is found in knowing God. To bring people to this knowledge of God and Christ is therefore the greatest gift one human being can give another. To preach, to teach, to catechize, to evangelize, to give witness – in whatever way it is done, to bring someone to the knowledge of the Truth is to bring them to salvation, to share in the eternal life.

The Pedagogy of God

Pope Paul VI in *Ecclesiam suam* (1964), his first encyclical letter, taught the Church that all teaching, communication and dialogue finds its deepest meaning in the dialogue of revelation itself. God's approach to humanity, calling men and women to share His wisdom and love, is the best model for how preachers, teachers and catechists should approach people in the service of the gospel. So God took the initiative (1 John 4:10), His approach originating in His goodness and love (John 3:16). God's commitment does not depend on the merits of the hearers or the fruits they bore (Luke 5:31). The approach and address of God is intended for all humanity (Colossians 3:11) and must be responded to freely (Matthew 11:21). It is a progressive thing whose full efficacy is not immediately seen: teachers and catechists must be patient and trusting that the seeds they have sown will bear fruit even if it is at another time and in another place.



The preaching or teaching of the gospel is always a spiritual contact between human beings and so, says Pope Paul, must be clear, meek, trusting and prudent. He fills out these characteristics saying that such catechesis will be intelligent, authoritative, adapted to the hearers, and keep them always in mind. Such catechesis will marry truth and charity, understanding and love.

The Seed Ground for Catechetical Endeavour

We can return then to thinking about religious life and why it is a fitting context in which catechists might live and be formed as catechists. A religious community has Christ at its heart and celebrates each day

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His presence, His communion and His life. Religious, like Mary, treasure all the words of the Scriptures and of the Church's liturgy, pondering them in their hearts. Such contemplation is the best possible preparation for catechesis.

Religious live together in community and religious life itself is *signum fraternitatis*,

as John Paul II puts it, a sign of the communion that is the life of the Church itself. It does not automatically mean that religious people are better Christians: just that their lifestyle expresses more clearly for us the commitment and communion to which all Christians are called. In fact the difficulties experienced by any group of people trying to live together in justice and charity are very helpful for forming catechists who will then not be too romantic about the realities of life together, knowing from experience the need for understanding and forgiveness.

Contemplation, communion and also mission. The various communities of apostolic religious life are engaged in a range of ministries and charitable service, not least in catechesis. What better service can one give another person, what higher gift, than to teach them the Catholic faith, bringing them to know the only true God and Jesus Christ whom He has sent. That knowledge is eternal life, into which we enter more deeply as we seek to bring others into the presence, communion and life of God. ✠

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