

Introduction

Msgr. Paul Watson

The most important reason for understanding divine pedagogy is, as the *General Directory for Catechesis* makes clear, that the pedagogy of God is both the source and the model for what is known as the pedagogy of the Faith. In other words, it is from God Himself that the Church has learned how to communicate and teach in such a way that an individual not only gains wisdom and knowledge of the Faith, but also is personally liberated and transformed by this knowledge, entering into a personal relationship with God Himself—a dialogue in which the person allows him or herself to be guided by God (*GDC* 139). The divine pedagogy begins in the Old Testament and reaches its zenith and perfection in the person of Jesus Christ.

In his words, signs and works during his brief but intense life, the disciples had direct experience of the fundamental traits of the “pedagogy of Jesus,” and recorded them in the Gospels: ... Inviting his disciples to follow him unreservedly and without regret, Christ passed on to them his pedagogy of faith. (*GDC* 140)

While the practice of catechesis today certainly draws upon modern wisdom and pedagogical methods, it is the pedagogy of God Himself that must really determine the practice of teaching and passing on the Faith. The process of transmitting divine Revelation is *radically* different from the ordinary human means of teaching and communicating. God’s pedagogy is first and foremost a work of grace, since God is primarily communicating Himself. The *GDC* speaks of this communication as a dialogue of salvation or redemption. The effect of Revelation is that God liberates the human person from the “bonds of evils and attracts him to himself by bonds of love” (*GDC* 139). This transforming effect is the product both of God’s creative and redemptive love and His condescension in accommodating Himself to the situation of humankind—“to the diverse ages and life situations.”

While the pedagogy of God is unique as a result of the transforming power of grace, the *GDC* insists that there can be no opposition or separation from the pedagogical action of man. It is significant to notice the various words the *GDC* uses to describe the relationship between the pedagogy of God and the pedagogy of man—it asks that there be no confusion, separation, or opposition. These words are strongly reminiscent of the words describing the relationship between the divine and human natures in the incarnate Person of the Word—Jesus Christ. The implication is that Jesus Christ Himself is the complete revelation of the pedagogy of God. Jesus is the Master Pedagogue in whom both divine and human pedagogy are joined—without confusion, separation, or opposition. This means that our catechetical methodology can never simply be a matter of adopting modern pedagogical models. It must always judge and adapt them in the light of Jesus. The catechist must, therefore, be prepared to immerse him or herself in the Gospels—reflecting on the encounters between Jesus and His disciples, between Jesus and the many others whom He leads to faith.

UNITED WITH CHRIST

Thus far we have been speaking of the pedagogy of God as the model for our own pedagogy or catechesis. When we speak of models, we usually imply that we have something to imitate—a pattern already established which we then follow. However, the relationship between the pedagogy of God and the practice of the catechist is much more profound. Catechesis is the *means* by which God's pedagogy is made present, here and now. We need to understand the teaching of the Second Vatican Council on the nature of the Church, especially the teaching in the Dogmatic Constitution of the Church (*Lumen Gentium*). The Council teaches that *the Church is, in Christ, in the nature of a sacrament* (see LG 1). In other words, the Church is not simply a gathering of those who profess to follow Jesus; the Church is a mystery (*mysterion* was the original word in Greek from which the word *sacramentum* is a Latin translation). The Church shares in and continues the very mystery of the Incarnation. This is the reason that the first chapter of *Lumen Gentium* expounds, using various biblical images, the relationship between Christ and the Church. The most profound image is that of the body. The Body of Christ is, like Christ Himself, a reality both divine and human:

The society structured with hierarchical organs and the Mystical Body of Christ, are not to be considered as two realities, nor are the

visible assembly and the spiritual community, nor the earthly Church and the Church enriched with heavenly things; rather they form one complex reality which coalesces from a divine and a human element. For this reason, by no weak analogy, it is compared to the mystery of the incarnate Word. (LG 8)

Here is a teaching of immense depth and importance. It is not, of course, a new teaching of Vatican II. It is rooted in the New Testament and in the patristic interpretations of the Scriptures. It is, however, a teaching that needs to be highlighted and stressed again today. It is typical to find many today speaking of the Church in language that derives more from sociology and the language of politics. The result is that, while still using the theological language of the Body of Christ, in practice the profound significance of the sacramental nature of the Church is largely lost to sight.

The Church is sacramental insofar as she is both the sign and the effective presence of the saving mystery of Christ. She *is* the continuing presence of Christ in the world, albeit a visible organization made up of sinful human beings. The divine element is precisely the mystical Body of Christ endowed with all the qualities, virtues, and power of Christ (*Lumen Gentium* describes these as “heavenly gifts”). Traditional theology has used the concept of *communicatio idiomatum* to describe the communication of the divine qualities of the Second Person of the Trinity to the human nature of Christ. In the same way, there is a *communicatio idiomatum* between the person of Christ and the Church. The Church shares in and perpetuates in time and space the qualities of Christ. Hence His salvific activity is continued in the actions (especially the sacraments) of the Church. His virtues are incarnated in each person in the Church through the gifts of the Spirit. His word is made present in the announcement of the Gospel, in the teaching of the Faith and in the ministry of consolation and healing that is the very stuff of the life of the Church.

The *General Directory for Catechesis* takes this general teaching about the relationship between Christ and the Church and applies it specifically to the Church’s mission of catechesis, stating: “From her very beginnings the Church, which ‘in Christ, is in the nature of a Sacrament,’ has lived her mission as a visible and actual continuation of the pedagogy of the Father and of the Son, ‘as our Mother is also the educator of our faith’” (GDC 141). Thus, the Church does not so much imitate the divine pedagogy as continue it, making it present in the world. The catechist, as a member of the Church, and indeed, a representative of the Church, is also the means by which the divine pedagogy continues and is effectively present. This, of course,

has tremendous implications for the catechist, both with regard to the goals of catechetical activity, since the goals are precisely those of divine pedagogy (liberation of the catechumen from bonds of evil and attraction to God Himself by bonds of love), and with regard to the personal formation and preparation of the catechist—nothing short of personal conformity to the Master, Jesus Christ, and of incarnating, in each and every particular situation, Christ the Teacher.

It is worth noticing at this point something in the *General Directory for Catechesis* that, at first, seems unusual. The first chapter of Part III, entitled “The Pedagogy of God, source and model of the pedagogy of the faith,” has various subsections which speak of the “pedagogy of God” and “the pedagogy of Christ” but, perhaps strangely, inserts “the pedagogy of the Church” before the section “Divine pedagogy, action of the Holy Spirit in every Christian.” This clearly reflects the importance of what we have already said above about the nature of the Church and the nature of the Church’s pedagogy. It appears that the GDC wishes to emphasize that the Church is continuing the pedagogy of Christ. The Spirit’s role is in fact, through His gifts and His activity, to conform the Church to Christ, and indeed, to conform the individual disciple in such a way that the disciple’s activity continues the pedagogical and redeeming mission of Christ. Hence, we can say that ultimately the pedagogy of God is the sending (the mission) of the Son and the Spirit, for the purpose of bringing humanity into communion, into participation in the divine life.

THE CHARACTERISTICS OF DIVINE PEDAGOGY

The primary characteristic of divine pedagogy is that it is progressive. As the *Catechism* states: “God communicates himself to man gradually. He prepares him to welcome by stages the supernatural Revelation that is to culminate in the person and mission of the incarnate Word, Jesus Christ” (*Catechism*, no. 53). The *Catechism* takes up the idea of Saint Irenaeus that God and man had to become accustomed to one another. Blessed John Henry Newman expressed the same idea and indicated that it was because of sin that humankind needed gradually to be introduced to God—sin determines even the manner of the Incarnation:

He once had meant to come on earth in heavenly glory, but we sinned; and then He could not safely visit us, except with a shrouded radiance and a bedimmed Majesty, for He was God. So He came Himself in weakness, not in power.¹

¹ John Henry Newman, “The Glories of Mary for the Sake of Her Son,” Discourse 17 in *Discourses to Mixed Congregations*, available at <http://www.newmanreader.org/works/discourses/discourse17.html>.

It was not only in the Incarnation that God chose to communicate with humanity slowly and in stages. The whole history of salvation, especially in the Old Testament, is testimony to this gradual unfolding of Revelation. God in His loving condescension accommodates Himself to the human condition. Principally, it was through transforming “events in the life of his people into lessons of wisdom” that God thus adapted Himself “to the diverse ages and life situations” (*GDC* 139). And so the events of Israel’s history become pregnant with divine meaning and are the vehicles of the divine pedagogy. God progressively reveals Himself and His purpose for humanity through the historical events of Israel and the key characters who play a role in shaping that history, figures such as Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, David, Elijah and the other prophets. Many other individuals, too, form the backbone of the history, each with their limitations and foibles, each within a particular context, but their lives and the events in which they are involved are transformed by God’s participation in them into divine pedagogy—at once partial in terms of the whole Revelation of God and yet containing within them the essence of that fullness finally revealed in the coming of Jesus.

This understanding of the history of salvation is the basis for the Catholic tradition of the spiritual reading of Scripture and for the Church’s insistence that Scripture be read as a unity. The Fathers of the Church saw Christ hidden within the events and persons of the Old Testament. This remains today the reason that we continue to read the Old Testament and proclaim it in the liturgy. In the Church’s practice of catechesis, which, as we have seen, is a continuation of divine pedagogy, the principle of gradual and progressive Revelation is respected through the practice of narrating the history of salvation and especially through relating this history to the liturgical events that make up the process of Christian Initiation, a succession of sacred events with divine power and meaning.

DIVINE PEDAGOGY AND THE LAW

God’s adaptation of Himself to the human condition also has the purpose of revealing that human condition. Divine pedagogy has the aim of revealing the slavery to sin in the human heart and at the same time, through God’s grace, of liberating and transforming the heart so as to make it capable of communion with Himself. Here we touch another important element of divine pedagogy—the Law.

In his *Letter to the Galatians*, Saint Paul describes the Law as a “pedagogue or guardian.” The people of Galatia were pagans. They had no knowledge of the religion and history of Israel, no knowledge of the Old Testament. During the

evangelization of Galatia, emissaries arrived from Antioch demanding that the Galatians be instructed in the Old Testament. The question for Paul was whether access to the Divine Teacher was now direct—does it now require passage through the Old Testament? The Greek word “paidagogos,” which we translate as “pedagogue,” did not refer to a teacher but rather to the slave who took the young child to the teacher, then led the child safely home again. The Law, according to Paul, performed the function of the “paidagogos,” leading the people of Israel on a journey, forming them to be capable of being taught by God. The journey through the wilderness of forty years was a very slow process. It was a kind of pilgrimage of formation. The Law embodied this formation, while it became interiorized in the people. The focus here is on *interiorization*. The Law only achieves its purpose if it becomes interiorized. This interior process is the work of grace, a divine activity in the human mind and heart. *Par excellence*, it was the prophets who emphasized this interiorizing of the Law and Covenant, and who castigated those “who honor me with their lips, while their hearts are far from me.” The Psalms, too, were seen as exemplaries—articulations of a heart transformed by God and as a result reflecting a heart that is in communion with God. Once again, we touch upon the reason why the Old Testament, in this case the Psalms, is so much part of our liturgy today, especially the Divine Office.

So what was Paul’s answer to the question? Do we still need the Old Testament and the Law? In one sense, no. The Law performed the function of a guardian until the individual came in contact with the Divine Teacher. Now the New Law, the Law of the Gospel, is the grace of the Holy Spirit, who brings us to the Divine Teacher, Christ, and “makes known to you all that is mine” (Jn. 16:15), and all that belongs to Jesus is from the Father. In the new dispensation, the divine pedagogy takes place as we learn to live in the Spirit, and in the Spirit learn to come to Jesus, to put our faith in Him and learn from Him how to order the use of grace in our lives. Through our union with Christ, our lives, our actions, and our words become the fruit of grace—not the mere following of a law. We have in fact returned to the earlier point made about our Christian lives in which the goal is conformity to the image of Christ. Docility to the Holy Spirit in our lives, whether it is in moments of darkness or enlightenment, is the goal of moral formation or development. Again, it is a process of interior transformation, cooperating with the action of the Spirit, conforming us to Christ and leading us to share in Christ’s filial relationship with the Father.

In another sense Paul answers, “yes,” to the role of the Law. The Law cannot justify us, cannot transform us or make us capable of communion with God. And yet it functions as a revelation of our sinful condition and indeed continues to function as a pedagogue in the sense that the Law (in particular, the Decalogue) leads us to Christ, and is by Christ deepened and made fully capable of being interiorized by the grace of the Spirit. Saint Irenaeus says,

The Lord prescribed love towards God and taught justice towards neighbour, so that man would be neither unjust, nor unworthy of God. Thus, through the Decalogue, God prepared man to become his friend and to live in harmony with his neighbour. ...The words of the Decalogue remain likewise for us Christians. Far from being abolished, they have received amplification and development from the fact of the coming of the Lord in the flesh.²

This aspect of the divine pedagogy teaches us the importance of moral development in our catechesis, yet it reminds us that only the divine action can touch the heart from the inside. This is the way of grace. The Decalogue serves the action of the Holy Spirit. The Church (as mother) must do as God does. In the formation and education of the child, the father and mother act in collaboration. So, the Father (through the mission of the Son and the Spirit) and the mother (the Church) act together in gracing the catechumen so that the heart is transformed and conformed to Christ.

Summing up so far, our exploration of the divine pedagogy as source and model for our own catechesis has led us to recognize the goal of catechesis (communion with the Trinity) and also God’s method of progressive and staged revelation and transformation through the events of salvation history, and through the Law, which is now seen as the precursor of the new law of the Spirit, which does not abolish the Law but deepens and transforms it in Christ. This divine pedagogy is continued in the Church in the progressive handing over (*traditio*) of the Creed (Part One of the *Catechism*), in the redemptive events of the Church’s liturgical life (Part Two of the *Catechism*) and in the moral development of the catechumen in the new life of the Spirit (Part Three of the *Catechism*).

THE DIVINE PEDAGOGY AND PRAYER

The divine pedagogy is a “dialogue of salvation between God and the person” (GDC 143). Our pedagogy of faith, equally, is more than either *information* or *formation*: it is ultimately a leading of the person into intimacy with God. And so we arrive at

² Saint Irenaeus, *Adversus haereses* 4, 16, 3–4; PG 7/1, 1017–1018. See *Catechism*, no. 2063.

the matter of prayer as an integral part of catechesis. As Part Four of the *Catechism* makes clear, prayer is essentially our entry into the filial prayer of Jesus. In this, it is Jesus Himself who is the Master Pedagogue and it is the Spirit who makes us capable: inspiring us to respond in faith to the thirst of God (manifested by Jesus' thirst on the Cross) for human beings to come to Him. In the *Catechism*, preceding Part 4 on Christian Prayer, there is a miniature from the Monastery of Dionysius on Mount Athos, showing Christ praying to the Father and Saint Peter turning to the others and pointing to Jesus as the Master and the way of Christian prayer.

The divine pedagogy of prayer also includes the Old Testament prefigurements—Abraham, Noah, Moses, David, and Elijah—while in the new dispensation, after the Divine Master Himself, there is Mary and the cloud of witnesses, the saints. Prayer is a response to God's call and involves embracing and contemplating the whole truth of God and profoundly grasping the spiritual reality thus communicated by God.³ For the catechist to serve this end of divine pedagogy, it is vital that he or she also be a witness, in other words, someone who knows personally the manner in which God teaches us, knowing both the consolations of prayer as well as the battle; who knows that dryness in prayer reveals that faith is both light and obscurity, and in times of the latter we are called to humble and persevering vigilance, with the Holy Spirit praying in us in "sighs too deep for words" (Rom. 8:26). According to the *Catechism*, it is above all the Lord's Prayer that conforms us to the filial prayer of Jesus. When the petitions of the Our Father truly express the desires of our heart, then will the image of Christ have come to maturity in us.

3 See *Catechism*, no. 2651.
