

**Catechetical Methodology**  
**Teaching Prayerfully**  
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*How can we ensure a prayerful approach in our catechesis?*

The principles of the pedagogy of God have recently been explained in the form of twelve ‘keys’ discerned from the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* and elucidated in the book the *Catechism of the Catholic Church and the Craft of Catechesis*.<sup>i</sup> This series suggests concrete ways of incarnating these in catechetical methods and practice.

The first key we explored in this series was that of ‘gracefulness’ - that is, ensuring the primacy of grace in one’s catechesis. The second key was ‘wholeness’, or a catechesis that addresses all ‘four dimensions of the Christian life’.<sup>ii</sup> The third key, that we explore here, is that of prayerfulness.

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**Prayer support for catechesis**

This article concerns ways in which we can create prayerful catechetical sessions. For this, one of the first things we need is the prayer of others. We need to ask others to pray for us and for our work. Catechists can seek the prayers of different parish groups - and, for example, of the sick and housebound, for the work of the handing on of the faith of the Church. The parish community as a whole is helped when different people and groups are asked to support each other. Different types of prayer groups recognised by the Church are all valuable - from the charismatic prayer group to the Rosary or Divine Mercy prayer group. The sick and housebound and those living on their own can also be asked to pray for catechetical work, for we know that the prayer of those suffering can be especially powerful.

**The prayer of the catechist**

We not only need to ask others to pray for us. We *ourselves* need to become people of prayer! The same parish prayer groups whom we ask to pray for us offer opportunities for us to become people of prayer. We know that catechetical sessions will not be prayerful unless the catechist is prayerful, and the catechist’s prayer life needs to be sustained within a praying parish community. As John Paul II put it, ‘our Christian communities must become *genuine “schools” of prayer*’.<sup>iii</sup>

*Prayer is first of all a grace for those  
who want to breathe deeply within themselves of God’s presence*

We must be especially wary of the temptation to reduce the time of prayer because of *catechetical* work! We may think that we need the time for other kinds of preparation, but - like Martha in the gospels - we will find our work turns quickly into heavy drudgery

when we neglect to sit at the feet of the Master, and when we are tempted to activism rather than simple service.

It is clear that prayer is essential for catechesis. It is essential both for catechists themselves and it is essential as a central feature of catechetical sessions:

*‘Only the experience of silence and prayer offers the proper setting for the growth and development of a true, faithful and consistent knowledge of that mystery which finds its culminating expression in the solemn proclamation by the Evangelist Saint John: “And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth; we have beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father” (1:14)’.*<sup>iv</sup>

What can we say to the catechists who do not start with prayer, or who do not think of prayer as an essential element of a catechetical session? What are the issues at stake? Why do some catechists consider prayer merely as an optional or occasional element?

### **Anxieties concerning prayer**

Some say that opening a catechetical session with prayer can give a false or misleading impression of what is to follow. The content of the session will be perceived to be too ‘religious’, too Catholic, too moral, or too ‘heavy’. It will appear to be insufficiently connected to ‘normal’ or ‘real’ life.

Others say that prayer can put participants off if they are unevangelised, while catechists can themselves become embarrassed or put off when prayer is interrupted by giggling. It is noted that participants might be reluctant parents coming to learn about their children’s sacramental preparation – and suddenly they find themselves in a session with a prayer component! Teenagers are sometimes highlighted as a group who can be present under duress and may not seem to be open to prayer.

Other catechists suggest that when people have come in from a hectic day, from ipods and text messages, loud music and chatter, they are too stimulated or fidgety to be ready to pray, while some catechists say that for certain sessions a ‘climate of prayer’<sup>v</sup> is not desired in any case - they prefer a climate of fun! Some even go so far as to say that it is simply not necessary to begin a session with prayer because God doesn’t need this initiative from us to be present and ‘at work’. He’ll be there anyway!

What are we to make of these attitudes? Some are presumptuous, of course. Most, though, are genuine anxieties which can be due to ignorance of prayer, embarrassment about praying in front of people, a simple lack of confidence, or perhaps a lack of conviction or trust. How can we help ourselves, and others, to realise that prayer is not optional, but essential in catechesis?

### **The power of prayer**

In answer to those who have hesitations about praying in catechetical sessions, we can simply reaffirm the basic truth that God desires us pray, to turn to him for every work, and especially is this true for the work of handing on the Faith. He wants us to turn to him because he wants to show that he will always answer our prayer. He never lets us down. Prayer is always a channel of grace, of Divine loving assistance that reaches straight to the heart. We can teach that we do not need to see immediate fruits of prayer because prayer is spiritual and works deep in the heart, in ways that God alone knows. We can trust totally in the name of Jesus Christ the Saviour, trust that the Word never returns empty without achieving what it sets out to do.

When people arrive distracted, disturbed, weary, embattled, negative, that is precisely when they most need prayer! We need not be put off by giggling or an appearance of cynicism on the outside. Prayer reaches the heart, the place of decision, the place of covenant<sup>vi</sup> and only God judges the heart - we do not know what is taking place in the hearts of those present.

A climate of prayer 'is especially necessary when the catechumen and those to be catechised are confronted with the more demanding aspects of the gospel and when they feel weak or when they discover the mysterious action of God in their lives' (GDC 85).

Only prayer can 'clear the air'. We can refer catechists to the parable of the Sower in Mark 4:3-8 where the birds of the air are said to come and remove the seed before it can take root. 'Spirits of the air' need to be cleared before catechesis begins. Prayer helps to calm and to remove negative attitudes, bringing the peace that only God can give. Beginning with the Sign of the Cross signifies our trust in the protective power of Christ's passion and his victory on the Cross.

When we pray in catechetical sessions we are acknowledging that catechesis is, first and foremost, the work of the Blessed Trinity, and it helps people connect doctrine with spirituality in their lives. Prayer puts everyone directly in communion with Christ. It indicates immediately that a catechetical session is not a 'horizontal' task, is not primarily a human endeavour, nor only an intellectual exercise - but an encounter with the living God.

When the catechist begins with prayer, then, he or she witnesses that neither 'catechesis nor evangelization is possible without the action of God working through his Spirit'.<sup>vii</sup> Because of prayer, catechesis is never separated from that 'vital and personal relationship with the living and true God. Prayer is precisely the means by which one can personally accomplish this appropriation of the mystery.'<sup>viii</sup> A growing love of doctrine accompanies a life of prayer. 'When catechesis is permeated by a climate of prayer the assimilation of the entire Christian life reaches its summit.'<sup>ix</sup>

### **Practicalities**

The Church urges catechists to create a prayerful attitude throughout their catechetical sessions. The simplest way to do this is by formally praying together at the beginning of a session, thus initiating the possibility of such a 'climate' of prayer. We can think of prayer as like bookends, supporting the whole session from beginning to end. In this way, the catechist witnesses from the start that praying is natural and desirable - and also provides an opportunity and a model for those who want to pray, even if, in the early stages, there are very few in the group who choose, or are ready to, participate. It is right to provide an occasion for the participants to experience communion with God. Every additional person in the group who prays - even if it is only one! - increases the effects of prayer in the session from the beginning.

### **Recommendations**

- Begin with a clear Sign of the Cross to acknowledge the presence and work of the Blessed Trinity
- Encourage prayerful posture, such as bowing the head, joining of hands in prayer
- Closing the eyes can help all ages (especially teenagers) to respect the personal privacy of others as they pray and to remove possibilities of embarrassment
- Use extemporary prayer invoking the Holy Spirit to make the initial time of prayer immediately relevant to the particular group
- Remember that a visit to the Church at the beginning or the end of the session takes people straight to the Blessed Sacrament, to God himself
- Gather around a focal prayer table to help young children to stay attentive
- Always direct prayer to a person, particularly to the Divine persons of the Trinity but also to Our Lady, the angels or the saints. This keeps prayer personal, from persons to persons, and avoids tendencies to think of God in pantheistic terms or as an ambiguous 'force' or 'superpower'
- Begin with thanks to God for something relevant to the session ahead
- When thinking about asking the saints' intercession, consider turning to the saint of the parish or of the diocese, or to the saint of the day
- Include one of the great traditional prayers of the Church that can be said out loud together such as the Lord's Prayer, the Hail Mary, or the Glory be
- Remember that the missal is a great source of prayers – look at the prefaces for the Mass of the day and the opening prayer in particular. Using these prayers can unite the participants to the universal Church at prayer that day

- Respect the sacrament of Holy Orders: if a priest or deacon is present, invite him to lead or contribute. In today's climate, priests frequently hand over this task to lay catechists but we do not need to be embarrassed to hand it back to the one ordained to minister
- Invoke Our Lady under her many titles, drawing on the rich source of prayers and antiphons for Feasts of Our Lady. Since she is our model and mother she can be invoked in many relevant ways: 'Our Lady help of Christians', 'Our Lady of Perpetual Help', and so on
- Consider, at the end of a session, a longer, more sustained time of prayer to help to establish a 'school' of prayer. Here one can introduce more fully the heritage of prayer of the Church

Use prayers related to the liturgical year to insert people into the way the Church lives her prayer

May and October – Mary  
June – the Sacred Heart  
End of October – Angels  
November - Holy Souls  
December – Advent, Christmastide  
March - St Joseph, Annunciation, Lent  
April - Eastertide  
May/June – Pentecost  
August – the Assumption of Our Lady  
And so on

The time of the liturgical year also affects colour, the use of the Gloria and Alleluia, and the use of flowers (e.g. subdued or not at all in Lent).

Be especially attentive during Holy Week, the holiest week of the year, not to do anything out of character with the Church at this time.

- Look at the prayers at the back of the *Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church*, a compendium for catechists, which are proposed as 'common' for all the faithful, that is, the baptismal birthright of the members of the whole body of Christ, such as: the Rosary, the Angelus, the Hail Holy Queen, and Acts of Faith, Hope and Charity
- Don't forget ancient prayers such as Litanies, blessings, Marian antiphons, O Antiphons in Advent, the Pentecost sequence, the *Veni Creator*, Stations of the Cross, and so on

- Refer people to the Divine Office, which is always appropriate as a basis for prayer, and also Benediction. Pope Benedict XVI, for example, has asked that Eucharistic Adoration and Benediction be part of a child's first Holy Communion preparation
- Do not be afraid to use some Latin, the language in which the Church has prayed since the beginning of her life
- Allow time for quiet reflection. The use of sacred music can provide a conducive prayerful atmosphere
- Employ the writings and prayers of the saints, Church Fathers, Popes, and so on for reflection and meditation
- Draw on the Church's tradition of sacramentals and symbols, such as holy water, candles, and incense. One can be creative in their use but always within the parameters of authentic Catholic spirituality. Avoid any confusion by conforming to liturgical practice – so, for example, the priest or deacon may bless and sprinkle with holy water, or the participants may bless themselves but not each other. Be careful not to integrate symbols or practices from other faiths
- Besides vocal prayer, educate participants into other prayer forms, especially using the Holy Scriptures. John Paul II wrote, 'listening to the word of God should become a life-giving encounter, in the ancient and ever valid tradition of *lectio divina*, which draws from the biblical text the living word which questions, directs and shapes our lives.'<sup>x</sup>
- Educate towards contemplative prayer, part of our baptismal birthright which is not reserved for mystics or those in religious orders. It is a progressive prayer journey whose summit is union with the Blessed Trinity. In *Novo Millennio Ineunte* John Paul II urges us to connect to this spiritual tradition of the Church, especially through the great doctor saints – such as St Catherine of Sienna, St Teresa of Avila, and St Therese of Lisieux. Begin this spiritual path with short periods of silent prayer, or prayer of the heart.

'Our Christian communities must become *genuine "schools" of prayer*, where the meeting with Christ is expressed not just in imploring help but also in thanksgiving, praise, adoration, contemplation, listening and ardent devotion, until the heart truly "falls in love" '<sup>xi</sup>

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## NOTES

<sup>i</sup> Pierre de Cointet, Barbara Morgan and Petroc Willey, *The Catechism of the Catholic Church and the Craft of Catechesis*, San Francisco: Ignatius Press 2008

<sup>ii</sup> Congregation for the Clergy, *General Directory for Catechesis*, London: Catholic Truth Society 122

<sup>iii</sup> John Paul II, *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, London: Catholic Truth Society 33

<sup>iv</sup> *Novo Millennio Ineunte* 20

<sup>v</sup> *General Directory for Catechesis* 85

<sup>vi</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church* 2563

<sup>vii</sup> Paul VI, *Evangelii nuntiandi*, London: Catholic Truth Society 75

<sup>viii</sup> de Cointet, *et al*, *Ibid*, p.131

<sup>ix</sup> *General Directory for Catechesis* 85

<sup>x</sup> *Novo Millennio Ineunte* 39

<sup>xi</sup> *Novo Millennio Ineunte* 33