

**Editor's Notes**  
**Catechesis and Dialogue**  
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**The centrality of dialogue**

As a teaching method in catechesis, dialogue is often given a prominent place: it is seen as a 'democratic' mode of teaching, enabling a range of views to be heard and considered within a relationship of mutual give and take; it seems to be respectful of the learner, speaking 'with' rather than 'to' the person, allowing the other into the teaching which is taking place; and it can develop the learner's potential, encouraging the development of critical and intellectual skills through a mutual and shared engagement with questions. Many go further, arguing that catechesis should privilege dialogue as the preferred means of communication of the Faith.

The Church documents speak of God's 'dialogue of salvation'<sup>i</sup> being at the heart of catechesis, so that 'The wonderful dialogue that God undertakes with every person becomes its inspiration and norm'.<sup>ii</sup> God speaks his word and seeks the response of his creatures. God reveals to man the plan he is to accomplish and calls for a response in faith to that Revelation. At the beginning of the first part of the Catechism this fundamental orientation of catechesis towards dialogue is implied: 'The dignity of man rests above all on the fact that he is called to communion with God. This invitation to converse with God is addressed to man as soon as he comes into being'.<sup>iii</sup> Cavalletti rightly emphasises that in catechesis there is a call to 'be attentive to the dialogue that is concretized in the covenant'.<sup>iv</sup>

**The use of dialogue in catechesis**

Given the clear importance of dialogue, how might this concretely be expressed in catechetical sessions?

First, we should notice that it is precisely *God's dialogue with man which is central*. It is *this* dialogue of salvation which catechesis serves. A dialogue style between catechist and catechumens always serves this more fundamental dialogue. This entails the catechist knowing when to stand back from direct dialogue with the catechumen so that the freedom of the catechumen and the freedom of God can meet in the personal 'drama'

that each individual has with God. The catechist invites the catechumen to the response of faith, as grace is given and as the person chooses: freedom is the hallmark of true catechesis.

Secondly, *we should note what is not being asked for by the Church*. The use of a dialogical style in catechesis does not mean that the content of the Faith can be somehow established or decided upon by mutual conversation and sharing. It is not to be thought that the Faith could be ‘constructed’ through dialogue. Our point of guidance here remains the teaching of Vatican I:

‘For the teaching of faith, which God has revealed, has not been proposed as a philosophical discovery to be perfected by human ingenuity, but as a divine deposit handed over to the Spouse of Christ to be guarded faithfully and to be explained infallibly. Hence the meaning of sacred dogmas must perpetually be retained which Holy Mother Church has once declared.’<sup>v</sup>

Dialogue in catechesis is unsuitable, therefore, for deriving definitions of the Faith,<sup>vi</sup> for discovering the content of the Faith, or for elaborating or seeking to develop the content of the Faith.<sup>vii</sup>

Thirdly, we should notice that *dialogue can take several forms*. One popular form of dialogue in the history of catechesis, of course, has been the question and answer approach, a form of dialogue, as between a master and disciple, and which is found in classical rhetoric.<sup>viii</sup> This form has proved particularly popular in the ‘smaller’ catechisms, and has recently appeared as the preferred approach in the *Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church*. The Introduction to the *Compendium*<sup>ix</sup> provides us with some indications to why this approach has been used. It speaks of the dialogue format as characteristic of the ancient model of master and disciple. In the dialogue, therefore, there is a figure who teaches and one who learns. The *Compendium* does not specify who is the questioner and who the one who answers. One might cast the disciple in either role: as the one seeking the Church’s wisdom from the ‘master’, or as the one responding to the master’s questions.

If the disciple is seeking answers, then the format is highlighting the desire of the learner for the truths of the Faith to find a place in his understanding and life. It is part of what the *Compendium* describes as the use of dialogue to ‘go deeper’ into issues: the learner is probing - perhaps drawing from ‘basic experiences’ and seeking the light of Revelation on these;<sup>x</sup> perhaps seeking further to appreciate the intelligibility and interconnectedness of the truths of the Faith;<sup>xi</sup> perhaps seeking to understand better the path of conversion and commitment in the light of God’s plan.<sup>xii</sup> In other words, the learner as questioner is seeking to understand better the pedagogy of God in his own life, as the place where God ‘reaches man with his grace and saves him.’<sup>xiii</sup> Dialogue is then a helpful tool in enabling catechists and catechumens to explore the relationship between the doctrines of the Faith and the concrete circumstances of their lives, between universal truths and the particular circumstances of each person’s life in Christ. Catechists witness to their own experience of faith-in-life, and dialogue with catechumens can assist in the mutual discernment of how faith impacts in different personal, cultural and social situations.

On the other hand, it may be the master who is asking the questions. The questions provide a focus upon what is essential and the catechumen is being led deeper by seeing which questions are important for the master-catechist, and is being challenged to consolidate learning through understanding and possibly memorising answers to these questions.

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## NOTES

<sup>i</sup> Congregation for the Clergy, *General Directory for Catechesis* (GDC) 143.

<sup>ii</sup> GDC 144.

<sup>iii</sup> CCC 27, citing *Gaudium et Spes* 19, 1.

<sup>iv</sup> S.Cavalletti, *The Golden Thread The History of Salvation*, Chicago: Catechesis of the Good Shepherd Publications 1999, p.1.

<sup>v</sup> *Dei Filius*, Ch.4. See J.F.Broderick, S.J., (trans) *Documents of Vatican Council I*. Collegeville: The Liturgical Press 1971, p.48. Cf DS 3020.

<sup>vi</sup> In this respect its role is to be distinguished from that found in the classic Socratic method, where dialogue is often used as a means of uncovering definitions through shared enquiry into a subject.

<sup>vii</sup> Dialogue is unsuitable for this for the simple reason that catechesis is to be distinguished from theological reflection and speculation. Catechesis is the practice of transmitting the Faith, not of speculating upon it.

<sup>viii</sup> See, for instance, Cicero, *De Oratore*, 13:45.

<sup>ix</sup> See *Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church*, Introduction, 2.

<sup>x</sup> See GDC 152a.

<sup>xi</sup> See GDC 152b.

<sup>xii</sup> See GDC 152c.

<sup>xiii</sup> GDC 152c.