

# Echoes of Christ: A Revisit on Catechesis in Relation to Current Challenges in Religious Education

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**Leonardo O. Quimson Jr.**

De La Salle University, Manila, Philippines

leonardo\_quimson@dlsu.edu.ph

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**Abstract** –*In this present age of educating the young people on the Christian faith, it is essential to know and rediscover if the catechists or religious educators still fulfil their mission moved by the Holy Spirit to teach the minds and touch the hearts of the learners in order for them to resemble Jesus not only in His words but also in works. For the goal of catechesis and religious education is not only to inculcate doctrinal truths of the Church and become authoritarian in teaching but to make all people have an encounter with Jesus in the classroom setting and instruction and as result, would have an intimate relationship with the Lord. This research study tries to trace back the importance and goals of catechesis and religious education from the point of view of the Church in Her teachings and compare it to the present or current challenges in teaching the faith. The researcher will use document analysis as its method in collecting, verifying and analyzing evidences or information from the existing Church teachings and put side by side with the recent studies on Religious Education. At the end, this study proposes ways in order to make catechesis more meaningful and effective to the learners and also, for the catechists and religious educators to be nourished always and revitalized in the propagation of the faith.*

**Keywords** –*Catechesis, Catechists, Christian Faith, Integral Evangelization, Religious Education*

## Catechesis: Its Meaning, Aims and Goals in the Light of the Church

Our Jesus Christ, before He ascended into heaven, have told to His disciples His mandate to “go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptize them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, until the end of the age” [1, Matthew 28:19-20]. This great command or directive given by the Lord to the apostles brings forth the foundation of the Church and the initial proclamation of the faith. After His passion, death and resurrection, Jesus Christ “together with God the Father sent the Advocate, the Holy Spirit in order that He may fulfil from within His salvific work and that He might move and animate the apostles to continue His mission to people” [2, #34]. These very words coming from Jesus Christ is the starting point of catechesis.

What is catechesis? Why is it needed? According to Fr. Braulio Peña, O.P. [3, p. 9], the word catechesis comes from a Greek word “katechizein” which means “to transmit, to deliver, to pass.” Catechesis is a term which means “the practice or actual transmission of the message of Jesus Christ”. St. Pope John Paul II [4,

#18] also explained in the apostolic exhortation “Catechesi Tradendae” that catechesis as “the education in the faith, particularly the teaching of the Christian faith passed on in an organic and efficient way, with a view to initiating the hearers into fullness of life”. In addition, it is also defined by the Synod of Bishops [5, #1] as “the activity by which the Word of God is constantly spread in a living and effective way, and which leading to a deeper understanding of Jesus Christ, both His Person and His saving message, consists in an ordered and progressive education in the faith, joined to a continuous process or maturing in the same faith”. Catechesis also “lays the basis for the building of the faith...the essential ministry of the Church for the realization of the mission mandate of our Lord Jesus Christ... It is nothing other than the way of transmitting the Good news, as the Christian community has received it, values it, celebrates it, lives it and communicates it in various ways” [6, #100 & 102]. Therefore, “the very essence and heart of catechesis is no other than the Person of Jesus Christ, the only begotten Son of the Father who suffered and died for all humanity and who now, after rising from the dead, is living with us everlasting” [7, #426]. Jesus wants all Christians to receive the Gospel and have

fullness of life, as St. Irenaeus of Lyons would tell, “The glory of God is a human being fully alive” [8, p.2]. A person who is being catechized has “a period of formation and apprenticeship in the Christian life” [1, #63).

In line with this, catechesis or religious education has its primary goal in “bringing the totality of the Christian message of Good News in order for its hearers to become living witnesses of Jesus on daily life in the world... Maturing in the faith refers to the ongoing growth in the Christian faith that pervades each part of one’s personal and communal life” [9, p.29]. In other words, catechesis aims that every Christian must have an personal relationship with Jesus Christ rooted in faith that is known, lived and celebrated. Catechist or religious educators must “respond to the Good Shepherd in a unique way by formally transmitting the faith to others... and it starts with a very simple act of faith when we say “I believe” with humble heart that says yes to living as a disciple of Christ... catechists must have a desire to surround people of all ages with a community of believers who love, understand and practice the Christian faith” [10, p. 1-2]. Furthermore, the Second Plenary Council of the Philippines [11, #183-184] gave emphasis on the importance of catechesis as the “most important area of renewal in the pastoral ministry of the Church in the Philippines... showing its significant relation to social apostolate and worship or prayer life”. But in order to have a deep encounter and relationship with the Lord, a person must open first his heart and have “conversion” as a beginning of renewed being. He or she must “turn away from sin and goes to the Lord and undergoes “metanoia” or change of heart” [11, #156]. Thus, the role of catechesis is to be an “essential component of the Church’s evangelizing mission which is to deepen the faith that evangelization invokes... The role of the catechists and religious educators is to echo not personal opinions or attitudes, but the message of Christ, the Lord’s self-disclosure of love or revelation to the whole world” [9, p.25-26]. To catechize also means “to make all people know and practice the teachings of Christianity” [12, p. 7]. Catechesis “builds up God’s Kingdom of justice, peace and love that is so central to the teaching of Jesus... the Catechist of God’s Kingdom” [13, p.105]. Furthermore, Fr. Joseph Roche, S.J. [14, p.30-33] shared in his book entitled “*Practical Catechesis: The Christian Faith as a Way of Life*” that there are three goals of catechesis or religious education. The first is

the “goal of Christian Education or catechesis is conceived primarily in terms of formation and transformation- beyond head level faith. Catechesis therefore is not only about “banking” necessary doctrines or teachings of the faith, rather, it must go beyond our learning and radiate its fruits through active involvement or social action and celebration of faith in worship. Secondly, catechesis has its “ecclesial dimension” to strengthen the Church as an indispensable setting for Catholic education. With this, Fr. Roche shows the role of the Church as “School of Christ and Christian discipleship” She is called to perform the Good News through following the way of Jesus. Lastly, the goal of catechesis is to “foster critical reflection on the religious experiences to help ground one’s identity as Christian. But this is not only about reflecting one’s experiences, but it must be connected to the deposits of faith, namely the Scriptures and Sacred Tradition which makes it a distinct function of catechesis, the interplay of the Word of God and human experience in connection to the teachings of the Church”. Meanwhile, the New National Catechetical Directory for the Philippines or NNCDP [6, #124-131] confirmed specific goals of catechesis. First, is to “develop understanding of the truths of the Catholic faith taken from the fundamental sources of faith- the Bible, Tradition and the Magisterium, the Church’s teaching arm... to love and appreciate God’s living Word and the teachings or doctrines of the Christian faith.” Second, the aim of catechesis is “to educate the catechized regarding the essential principles and practice of Christian Morality...through the Commandments, the concrete norms of love.” Third, the specific goal of catechesis is “to instruct the Catholic faithful to pray and actively involved in the liturgy of the Church... in the sacraments particularly in the Eucharist, to receive Christ’s life-sustaining gift of Himself, the Risen Lord whom we encounter.” Another goal of catechesis is “to develop a sense of belongingness and commitment to serve as active members in the Church community...best exemplified through Basic Ecclesial Communities or BEC’s.” Lastly, the fifth goal of catechesis is “to make the catechized grow in incarnating the Christian faith in attitudes and values in daily living, at the same time, interpreting and relating their daily life experiences in the light of the Gospel... to be able to discern the daily events and choices of one’s life in the light of faith... discovering how God works in your life”.

This is also noticeable to what Thomas Groome [13, p.111] presented on his reflection on the goal of catechesis as holistic Christian faith and life in the way of “Head, Heart and Hands”. He said:

“...First, the way of Head speaks about discipleship of faith seeking understanding and trust with personal conviction, continued by learning and investigation, by searching and reflecting, by discerning and deciding, all toward spiritual understanding for life. Second, the way of the Heart claims a discipleship of just relationships and right desires, community building, kindness and inclusion, trust God’s love, and prayer and worship. Lastly, the way of the Hands demands a discipleship of charity, justice, peacemaking, simplicity, truthfulness, healing and contrition”.

This really shows that catechesis or teaching the faith is not only limited on the formation of knowledge but “the heart of catechesis is an image of a person formed for a life of love for God and for His people” [15, p. 5].

With this reality in Christian formation, it is necessary that religious instruction or catechesis must be “integral” or holistic, not only teaching the minds on the various doctrines and teachings of the faith, but the challenge is on how to live these teachings of Jesus Christ and develop a deeper sense of God in prayer and sacramental life. This is how essential catechesis for “the Church is the messenger of the Gospel but she begins by being evangelized Herself... She has a constant need of being formed and evangelized, if She wishes to retain newness, vigor and strength in order to announce the Gospel” [11, #154]. Thus, renewed catechesis is the “primary element of a renewed integral evangelization... It must be (1) Christocentric and rooted in the Word of God for nothing can speak better of the Incarnate Word of God than the Scriptural Word of God which is the primary catechetical book. (2) It should also be inculturated and would need that the Gospel be preached in the words of the people for without such action, either the Christian message remains unknown to the Filipino or the Filipino in accepting it risks alienated from his way of life. And lastly (3), catechesis must be systematic or presented in an efficient and programmed way the entire Gospel from the Bible and Tradition as taught by the Church without misrepresentation or reduction, highlighting the basics of Catholic belief and practice [11, #156-163].

In addition, renewed catechesis would not be enough, for renewed integral evangelization also demands “renewed social action and renewed worship”. PCP II [11, #165, 167 & 169] tells:

“The Church evidently recognizes that Christian Social Action, i.e., action carried out by the Church and its members to promote human progress, justice in society and peace, is a task without which evangelization is not integral or holistic... While the third area of renewal is worship. Renewing the worship life requires renewing our prayer life”.

### **Teaching the Faith in the Contemporary World**

After knowing and revisiting the teachings of the Church on Catechesis and Religious Education, this study will look into the present challenges in teaching the faith in the contemporary world. How does the Church reads the “signs of the times” and still apply the essential truths of the Christian faith in the present world? In considering education in Christian faith, it is necessary to be realistic about the times and contexts in which people live nowadays. Is catechesis still relevant to the young nowadays? Or if not, how will the Church act on it through Her pastors, catechists and religious educators?

At present, the people “seem to become more secular than ever, with clear increased stress on materialistic values, consumerism and globalization.” [14, p. 18]. Secularism can be “that religious custom has fallen off; that the secular and religious powers have been detached in society; or that the current socio-cultural conditions discouraged the practice of religious faith.... It is noticeable that a decline in faith and practice has occurred, and beyond this, that the unchallengeable status that belief enjoyed in past centuries has been lost” [13, p. 159]. Sadly, “this growth in secularization promotes a post-modern world that defies simplistic definition. Advances in science and technology, the turn to the subject in philosophy, and the deep impact of social sciences, mark the start of the twenty-first century which effects an increased stress on historicity and individualism, and their incredible influence of the mass media which has literally created a new “one world”. These effects touch every dimension of the cultural, social and religious life of individual Filipinos and families, especially the youth of today” [14, p. 18-19]. In addition, “one of the effects of secularism is to promote the idea in the minds and thoughts of the youth that the world can be governed by knowledge, in its common sense, and religion is only for the

hereafter [16, p. 2063]. Hence, these changes calls for a “phenomena of the new seeking for the Divine, for a God who is relevant for today, a God that makes a difference in people’s everyday living... a thirst for God and for a renewed spirituality who are caught up in this secularist times” [17, p. 70].

Another trend with regards in religious education or catechetical instruction is the “tremendous advancement in communications which have hugely revised old conceptions of doctrine and of experience... This will lead to new forms of relativism or any exaggerated trendy or individualistic way to the faith” [17, p. 71]. This is really evident in the Filipino setting nowadays in the advent and rise of “social media”. For instance, in the Philippine setting, research tells that the country was the “top among other nations with 83.1% Filipinos belonging to social networking sites and it was also the Filipinos, who became top users who habitually share photos and videos to their social media sites. Apparently, the increasing number of social media users are students or whose Filipinos aged 15 to 24 years old” [18, p. 5]. Moreover, according to Castro [19, #3] the Philippines is the “Social Media Center of the world with 44 million Filipinos who are Internet users and 40 million of them are active social media users... The percentage of social media access has increased from 40% in 2015 to 47% in 2016. This trend also offers “a platform to hook up with new people, share experiences and gain contact” [20, p.1]. The danger, on the other hand, is that it will become the “new truth” and sole basis of knowledge which will weaken the search for facts and basic truths of the faith in a classroom setting and conversational manner. Many people nowadays would rely more on Internet and Social Media rather than what is taught inside the classroom and this could lead to relativist or individualistic views. For instance, the youth of today seems to have “double lives or faces”, namely the “offline life or face” or the usual face to face encounter with people, and the “online life or face” where in they engage themselves more actively in the virtual or digital world. The young people would speak more and express their sentiments, concerns, and comments through online but in the “real” world, some would not even speak and engage in some social issues especially in the faith. They tend to just remain silent in order to avoid discrimination or criticisms and just express in their “new world, the social media” their real views. This unhealthy and dangerous truth made the Catholic Church through the Synod of

Bishops on Young People, the Faith and Vocational Discernment [21, #24] declare that “Digital media can expose persons to the risk of dependency, seclusion and gradual loss of contact with concrete reality, blocking the maturity of authentic interpersonal relationships... These closed circuits assist the spread of fake news and false information, fomenting injustice and hate. The increase of fake news is the expression of a culture that has lost its sense of truth and bends the facts to suit personal interests. The reputation of persons is put in jeopardy through summary trials conducted online. The Church and Her leaders are not exempted from this phenomenon”.

One more challenge in catechesis is having an experiential and contextual approach in teaching the faith. According to Legaspi [17, p.75 & 78] “if there is something that needs to be totally improved in our catechetical instruction, it is surely the teaching of the doctrines of the Church... there is an ineffective teaching of the doctrine’s relevance to the daily life of faith which must be taught as liberating, saving, inspiring and uplifting in daily life. Instead of founding a personal, heartfelt commitment to Jesus, Catholic doctrine is often caricatured as opposing such personal loving faith”. In this matter, the catechists are the ones responsible as well as the various catechetical schools and formation groups has something to do in order to address the current need. There must be a balance when it comes to the teaching of the basic truths on the faith and relating these basic truths in the experiences or life situations of every person. Catechists and religious educators must always be aware of being integral in their approach, to discuss with the students the faith not only by memorizing formulas and laws, but also making the learners realize the relevance or essence of these sacred truths in their lives. He added that “catechesis and religious education have to be grounded in, must draw from, and be in unvarying contact with people’s ordinary experiences”.

Lastly, one of the challenges or trends in teaching the faith or religious education nowadays is the need for inclusivity in education regardless of race, color, religion etc. This will be rooted on the Church’s mission, particularly the Catholic Schools in education. According to the Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education [22, #9], in the document entitled “The Catholic School”, the Church explains the Catholic School’s fundamental mission of that “forms part of the Church’s saving mission, especially for education of faith... It is exactly in the Good News of

Jesus, taking root in the minds and lives of people, that the Catholic school finds its meaning as it comes to terms with the educational circumstances of the times". Catholic Schools are among "the most essential and effective avenues of evangelization of the Church... and it should therefore reaffirm evangelization as its primary goal for education" [11, #623 & 637]. This also shows that Catholic schools are given this essential mission to be an evangelizing arm of the Church for they must "give integral or holistic education which is a right for every student or learner and it will respond later on to all his or her needs as a human person" [22, #3]. In the Declaration on Christian Education or *Gravissimum Educationis* [23, Introduction], St. Pope Paul VI discussed that,

"...the Sacred Ecumenical Council has measured with care how exceptionally vital education is in the life of human beings and how its influence ever grows in the social development of this age... To fulfill the directive She has received from Her Creator of proclaiming the mystery of salvation to **all people** and of restoring all things in Jesus, Holy Mother Church must be concern with the **whole living of a person**, even the secular part of it insofar as it has a bearing on Her divine calling".

With this mandate, catechists and religious educators are reminded to remain faithful to proclaim and live the teachings of Jesus Christ but assuring an atmosphere of a "more open, pluralistic in attitude and establishing a relationship with other religious communities and faiths... emphasizing inculturation and interreligious dialogue" [17, p. 78]. The Catholic school should be "exceptional in its effort to make or produce a community climate for all persons in the school that is permeated by the Gospel force of love and free will" [24, p. 301]. The Church must continue to make "a family environment moved by respect and love for God and His people, in which the well-formed individual and common education of children is fostered" [23, # 1&2]. Catholic schools must "develop with exceptional care the scholarly faculties and also to form the capability to judge decently, to hand on the enlightening legacy of previous generations, to cultivate sense of standards, to prepare for professional life... to uphold friendly relationships and promote a spirit of communal understanding" [23, #5]. In other words, catechesis and religious education

in schools must foster unity amidst diverse faith and be able to inculcate in the minds and hearts of every learner, whatever race, color or religion, the values of God's Kingdom.

#### CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

After reviewing and revisiting the teachings of the Church on Catechesis and Religious Education as well as the current trends or challenges it faces, this study concludes that catechesis and Religious Education is very essential in the formation of all people of God and in the mission of the Church to New Evangelization. This great task entrusted by Jesus must be renewed and intensified through inspiring formation of catechists and religious educators for the continuous mission in the Church, the Vineyard of the Lord [1, Mark 12:1-12]. It is necessary for the Church, to accomplish this task, to make the catechists have "a profound faith, a clear Christian and ecclesial character as well as social sensitivity... in order to pass on not only a teaching but also an integral Christian formation... which demands all catechists to be witnesses of the faith" [2, #237]. This factor is really needed in the present time for "children learn by observation and imitation... They imitate what they see and what others do around them. They are not yet matured enough to discern what is good and bad. Hence, the need for close observation to help them to grow to maturity" [25, p. 117]. Witnessing, not just proclaiming the faith, is necessary nowadays for "modern human beings listen more eagerly to witnesses than to teachers, and if they do listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses" [26, #41].

Another concern on catechesis and religious education is to always see the connection or know the linkage of the content or doctrine in relation to the human experience or life situation. This is crucial for students will appreciate all these revealed truths in the faith if they will see and value its relevance in their daily lives. Every catechism class or religious education class must "plant in all students a desire for encounter the presence of God in every situation, even in times of adversity and conflict" [10, p. 8]. Even Jesus Christ did not go directly to the main content of His teachings but He used various methods such as telling parables and miracles in order to be avenues or stepping stones in proclaiming the Kingdom of God.

Lastly, catechesis, in order to address the signs of the times, must promote inclusive atmosphere that is open for interreligious dialogue. Catholic Schools must be a place where learners, no matter what

religion, sex, color they may have, must inculcate values for moral development and equality amidst differences.

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