

THE NEW DIRECTORY FOR CATECHESIS

Highlights and Summaries for
Catechists and Pastoral Leaders

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The Purpose of this Commentary

The release of the *Directory for Catechesis* (DC) marks another milestone in the ongoing development of catechetical ministry. It invites all of those involved in the ministry—catechists, catechetical leaders, bishops, pastors, parents, and the parish at large—to engage more fully in sharing the faith. This guide to the document, in following the format of the DC, emphasizes only those principles and themes of catechesis that are either significantly updated from its predecessor, the 1997 *General Directory for Catechesis* (GDC), or are completely new and, therefore, unique to the DC. The aim of this guide is to highlight and reflect on significant themes of continuity and uniqueness found in this long-awaited Directory. Second, and equally as important, it aims to echo, with enthusiasm, the DC's call and encouragement to reclaim and proclaim the joy of the gospel today and, in so doing, to rediscover the joy of catechesis. Each section ends with a prayer summarizing the section and encouraging the reader to go forth and make disciples (Mt 28:19–20). Finally, at the end I offer a few final thoughts on the need to rediscover the joy of catechesis today.



PREFACE

Beginning with Humility and Gratitude

The DC's Preface speaks with a warm and humble tone, reminiscent of Pope Francis, whose influence on it cannot be overstated. From the beginning of his papacy, Pope Francis has strived to present himself more as a humble companion of the Church, rather than its leading authority figure: the Vicar of Christ. The world caught its first glimpse of Francis' humility when he broke from protocol during the offering of his first papal blessing from the balcony of St. Peter's. He asked the crowd gathered in the rain-drenched square to pray for him, and then he bowed to receive their prayers. This was something new, and it was inspiring. Indeed, the humility of Francis has caught the Church's attention, and that same humility reverberates strongly throughout the DC.

The Preface acknowledges with gratitude that it is the beneficiary of the Church's ancient and auspicious catechetical heritage, echoed down through the ages in the form of the baptismal catechumenate, magisterial documents, and lauded teachers of the faith (some of whom are canonized saints). In particular, the Preface acknowledges the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965)

as a major influence, with its focus on rearticulating (*aggiornamento*) the nature and role of the Church and its relationship to the modern world. Vatican II's *Decree Concerning the Pastoral Office of Bishops in the Church* called for a general catechetical directory, a departure from the precedent set by the *Roman Catechism*, published in 1566, after the Council of Trent. The DC marks the third time a general catechetical directory has been published, with prior publications in 1971 and 1997. Highlighting magisterial documents and synods that have pushed catechesis forward, particular attention is paid to the 1977 Synod: *On Catechesis in Our Time*; the Synod of 2012: *The New Evangelization for the Transmission of the Christian Faith*; St. Paul VI's apostolic exhortation *Evangelization in the Modern World* (1975); and St. John Paul II's apostolic exhortation *Catechesis in Our Time* (1979). The Preface speaks of the latter with special affection, as the touchstone for catechesis for over four decades.

The Global and the Digital

The Preface continues by identifying “digital culture” and the “globalization of culture,” as two key and interconnected phenomena that have precipitated the need for a new Directory. (These two themes are revisited multiple times in this commentary, as they are in the DC.) Indeed, the interconnectedness of people today, and the instant sharing of ideas, behaviors, customs, and experiences that goes along with it, have all necessitated a new vision for catechesis. A catechetical vision that will meet these challenges must include a reverence for the uniqueness of the individual person in their sociocultural context and the experience of faith derived from it. While catechesis engages the culture through its own elements (e.g., language, customs, symbols, technologies, etc.), it must, at the same time, com-

municate its own language of faith, placing cultures in contact with divine revelation through the sources of ecclesial faith (e.g., Sacred Scripture and Tradition, the Magisterium, liturgy, and theology) and the elements of ecclesial life (e.g., community, charity, prayer, and mission). This new vision of catechesis must hold in tension the poles of the individual and God, and the individual with God in community and its cultural context. Like evangelization, catechesis must encourage faith and conversion at the level of the individual, but at the same time it must seek to engage the culture, the context by/through/in which one comes to understand one's self and place in society and in the world. Therefore, the catechist, formed by helping to form others in faith, lives out his or her identity and calling by helping others to discover Christ, alive and at work in their lives. From there, the catechist then continues to accompany others as they grow to understand their place in God's saving plan, as well as their own call to evangelize within the context of their own culture, their own life. Cultures are changed one person at a time.

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Gospel-centered (Kerygmatic) Catechesis

The whole of the DC hinges on understanding and appreciating the connection between catechesis and evangelization, and the vital role of accompaniment in both. To do this, the catechist must keep the gospel message at the forefront. Quoting extensively from Francis' exhortation *The Joy of the Gospel* (2013), the Preface introduces the theme of *kerygma* (gospel message) and



INTRODUCTION

Evangelization, Catechesis, and Church Renewal

The Directory’s Introduction begins by identifying the desire for Church renewal as the primary reason behind its development. The connection between catechesis and Church renewal is not new. For centuries, the Church has looked to catechesis as a key means of cultivating new generations of vibrant Catholics.

While catechesis certainly plays an important role in the life of the Church, it must be viewed alongside, and work in concert with, efforts at liturgical, theological, and pastoral renewal—each of which is united under the ministry of evangelization: the Church’s fundamental mission and, therefore, its entire reason for being. Consequently, because renewal in the Church affects evangelization, and evangelization and catechesis are intimately connected, as new efforts to evangelize take shape, catechesis must develop in kind. Perhaps the Church will soon speak about the “New Catechesis” for The New Evangelization.

Because they each have their source in divine revelation, amplified and centered by Christ in the gospel, and because of their mutual ties to the experience of (and participation in) the liturgical mystery (*mystagogy*), catechesis cannot be thought of as something separate or additional to the work of evangelization (no. 2). The two are interrelated, symbiotic even. For example, what one does to evangelize through words and deeds, and through witness, must be considered essential for catechesis also. Likewise, probing the mysteries of the faith—the work of catechesis, traditionally speaking—can be a part of ongoing evangelization. What is certain is that traditional differentiators between evangelization and catechesis can no longer be thought of as *differences between* but, rather, as *points of intersection and integration*. Therefore, to lead people into intimate communion with Christ (no. 3), evangelization and catechesis must correlate and reinforce each other. Catechists must also be evangelists.

The Need for Evangelization

Because we are always stand in need of salvation, evangelization is the Church's fundamental mission. Through evangelization, we encounter the risen Lord and his merciful love for us. Indeed, we need a savior! This is evidenced, theologically, by the fact that we are sinners who are loved by God and justified in Jesus Christ through faith and baptism. Put another way, if we weren't always in need of salvation, the Church wouldn't bother to proclaim the gospel daily and sacramentalize this proclamation through the sharing of Eucharist. If this, in fact, were reality, we would be in heaven. Only there do sin and death cease to exist. Only in heaven do we live, perpetually, in that blessed communion, beholding God face to face (1 Cor 13:12–13), held up by God's loving gaze.



PART ONE

Catechesis in the Church's Mission of Evangelization

Divine Revelation: Remembering the Goodness of the Good News

Following the pattern of the GDC, the DC follows up its survey of the historical and cultural landscape in which catechesis must operate with a look at divine revelation as the source and paradigm of all evangelization and catechesis. The most salient point of this entire section is that life begins and ends with the goodness of God. God is the initiator, purpose, and fulfillment of all life: God is the *logos* (Jn 1:1).

A beautiful understanding of this point is found in the prayer of the priest or deacon while he prepares the chalice at Mass: “Through the mingling of this water and wine, may we come to share in the divinity of Christ, who humbled himself to share in our humanity” (*General Instruction of the Roman Missal*, no. 178). It's odd that this prayer is to be said silently, as it is a succinct proclamation of God's plan of salvation. In Christ,

heaven and earth are reconciled; God’s plan of salvation—that all may be one (Jn 17:21)—is fulfilled. Acknowledging this saving truth, and learning to live into it, is the fruit of receiving and proclaiming the Good News, the very “goodness” of which is God’s lavish mercy. Through Christ, and the working of the Holy Spirit, our fantastic dreams of being born with great dignity and purpose, our belief that we are destined for greatness, and our infinite capacity and need for love find their fulfillment in God, who knew us and chose us first (Jer 1:5; Jn 15:16).

We enter into God’s revelation as unique individuals *and* as members of the Church. Our individual understanding and experience of divine revelation is necessarily tethered to the believing community and to the apostolic tradition (nos. 25–26) on which it stands. Led by the Spirit (no. 23), who acts in us and through us, we are led to deeper communion and holiness of life. The DC succinctly articulates the great mystery of divine revelation, God’s saving plan, in the following outline (no. 14):

The Christian proclamation communicates the divine plan, which is:

- a mystery of love: human beings, loved by God, are called to respond to him, becoming a sign of love for their brothers and sisters;
- the revelation of the intimate truth of God as Trinity and of humanity’s vocation to a filial life in Christ, source of his dignity;
- the offer of salvation to all people through the Paschal mystery of Jesus Christ, gift of God’s grace

and mercy, which implies liberation from evil, from sin, and from death;

- the definitive call to reunite scattered humanity in the Church, bringing about communion with God and fraternal union among people already in the here and now, but to be fulfilled completely at the end of time.

Each of the above elements of Divine Revelation builds upon the others, but it all begins with God's merciful love, the ultimate goal of which is "to reunite scattered humanity in the Church, bringing about communion with God and fraternal union among people already in the here and now, but to be fulfilled completely at the end of time" (no. 14).

One could say that revelation is how God evangelizes us. By bearing witness to Godself through life-giving words and deeds, writing with creation and human history as an author writes a book or an artist paints a picture, God chooses to be revealed. And in God's self-expression (self-disclosure) we are evangelized. In Christ, the

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fullness of the revelation of God, we see our fulfillment, the promise of the fullness of joy. From this we can conclude that when we actively participate in God's revelation we are, in fact, evangelizing. Evangelization (and catechesis) are about being led by the Spirit and sharing that same Spirit with others. We evangelize when we receive God's revelation and allow our lives to be transformed by it. Out of this transformation comes the desire to share God, whom we've come to know, and the wonders God has done for us.

God, the Great Companion

God is the primary evangelizer. God is the author—and editor—of our salvation. Because of this, evangelization and catechesis should never fail to identify God as the One who always takes the initiative and who never fails to accompany us. God’s companionship is experienced in the Church through its mission of evangelization. Through the Church, Christ and the Holy Spirit accompany us into deeper communion with each other and with God the Father. God’s accompaniment of us, vividly expressed in the life of Christ, is the way of evangelization.

Catechesis as a Call to Holiness

God is revealed through history, culminating in Christ: the fullness of revelation. We enter into God’s revelation through faith and baptism, from which come a transformation, expressed in terms of *conversion*, the fruit of which is communion and intimacy with God. Throughout history, such communion has been present in its clearest and most vibrant forms in the lives of the saints. Therefore, it is not surprising that the DC’s Preface wastes no time identifying *holiness* as descriptive of both the purpose of catechesis and the catechist’s way of life. Holiness of life is the incarnate authenticator of the truth and power of the gospel message. In fact, the Beatitudes, “are like a Christian’s identity card” (no. 83).

Knowing the Faith and Responding to It

Evangelization and catechesis must keep the love of God as their focus, as “the Christian faith is, first of all, the welcoming of God’s love revealed in Jesus Christ, sincere adherence to his person, and the free decision to follow him” (no. 18). When we, in catechesis, speak of “the faith” being taught or shared, we

are, first, speaking of the interpersonal dimension of faith: God reveals Godself to humanity and to each of us individually, and human beings choose to respond or not. In addition, “the faith” also means the accumulation and systemization of religious experiences of (and reflections on) God’s revelation within the believing community, the Church. In this sense, faith describes all that the Church has received, experienced, and taught by way of apostolic tradition, going back to Jesus and the first apostles. Faith described in this way has traditionally been referred to as the *deposit of faith*, which the Church gives expression to in one of three ways: its law of prayer, law of belief, and/or law of life (*lex orandi, lex credendi, and lex vivendi*). Though a “deposit” of doctrine, guarded by the Magisterium—the official teaching body of the Church, comprised of the bishops in union with the pope—Catholic Tradition, the DC states, “is not primarily a collection of doctrines, but is a life of faith that is renewed every day” (no. 26). Likewise, “Evangelizing is not, in the first place, the delivery of a doctrine; but rather, making present and announcing Jesus Christ” (no. 29). Catechesis should strive to embody this. Therefore, catechesis should seek to embrace the “both/and” of faith. It should recognize and deliver faith as a content to be learned and believed; and it should present the faith as a unique response to God, in whom we come to believe and live.

The Stages of Evangelization

The stages of evangelization are as follows: *Missionary activity, initiatory catechesis, and pastoral action* (nos. 33–35). These stages have not changed since the GDC; however, the DC places even greater emphasis on the need for a catechesis that also evangelizes. In other words, catechesis must adopt for itself the same aims and goals as evangelization.