

Lighting the Way: Religious Educators at the Heart of the School

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The theme of our conference this weekend is “Lighting the way - religious education at the heart of the school.” I’ll begin by unpacking this theme for a few moments. I might even correct it somewhat by saying that religious education, or catechesis, is not really at the heart of the Catholic school. It is good religious educators who fulfil that role. “Lighting the way” is not so much the function of courses or textbooks, as it is the outcome of a prophetic witness of faith. Calling young people to faith, or to grow in their faith, is primarily a matter of sharing with them our experience of God. But I’ll return later to this subject.

“Lighting the way” is scriptural language that finds its origins in St. John's Gospel – “I am the light of the world”. Scriptural images are very nourishing, but we need to reflect on them in order to experience that nourishment. ‘Water’ and ‘light’ are used throughout this gospel to communicate what it might be like to surrender oneself to the reign of God being ushered in by Jesus. Nothing can live without water. But Jesus gives people powerful, living water - the energy of the Spirit that fills them with a new thirst for God and a new energy for discipleship.

Light is opposed to darkness. There's a marvellous story in John's Gospel, chapter nine, that brings out the full significance of what this image of light is meant to express - the story of the man born blind, the man who lived in darkness from birth. You know the story. Jesus heals the man born blind on the Sabbath day. The upholders of the Law are angry and judgmental, the man's parents are afraid to acknowledge the miracle, and the man born blind, who can now see, begins to move forward in faith. At the outset, he describes Jesus as “the man called Jesus”; then he declares, “he is a prophet,” and then, “if this this man were not from God, he could do nothing,” and finally, “Lord, I believe,” as he falls down and worships him. In this story, the healing of the man born blind, his movement from darkness to light becomes a powerful metaphor for a person's journey to a full and complete faith. And while that is happening, the other actors in the story are moving in the opposite direction - from little light to a deep darkness. This story, of course, is meant to hold up a mirror to all who hear it. How do we see ourselves in the light of this narrative? Are we moving towards a full and complete faith or are we moving in the opposite direction? We can't light the way for anyone unless we ourselves are moving towards the light.

Before I go any further, let me go over some background to the Church's catechetical enterprise today. The Second Vatican Council changed Catholics' perspectives on many things. For the first time in the history of General Councils, the Church was not so much intent on laying down new laws and regulations, but rather on entering into dialogue with the contemporary world so that people might come to see how the gospel gives meaning to human life and, in this way, be won over to the gospel. There was a determination to get away from power language – because it doesn't work anymore: in other words, to move from command to invitation, from law to ideals, from defining mystery to inviting people to enter into the mystery, from threats of hellfire to persuasion, from coercion to conscience, from monologue to dialogue, from ruling to serving, from vertical to horizontal, from exclusion to inclusion, from separated to integrated, from

authoritarian to collaborative. That was the spirit of the Council. It represented a move to find a better balance between authority and charism, that is, between authority and the gifts and aspirations and inspirations of ordinary people in the Church. This kind of Church is still struggling to be born today: some people would say it has already been aborted in certain places. At any rate, the implementation of the Council in a fuller way remains a task for ours and future generations.

What impact should all this have on the catechetical enterprise, and specifically, within a school setting? What should we be trying to accomplish? As you know, this enterprise has no formal relationship with the educational task that is sponsored by the State. What is the difference between what you do when you teach a curriculum subject in your classroom and what you do when you are catechising young people? Is it simply that the subject and content of the lessons are different? How would you describe what you are doing? Are you simply teaching people the doctrines of the Church – banking ideas in peoples' heads, as Paulo Freire once described it, or is it some- thing more than that?

Are you handing on the faith? Are you preparing people for the sacraments? Are you getting them excited about the Word of God? Yes, you're probably attempting to do some or all of those things, but there's something more important – what I mentioned at the beginning. Have we come to the point in our lives where we are able to share with the children our own experience of God? It was theologian Karl Rahner who made the famous statement that the time is coming when people will believe in a God they have experienced, or they will believe in nothing at all. That time has now arrived. That's why the most basic and most powerful definition of catechesis is “sharing with others my own experience of God.”

So we're not dealing here with secondary issues, such as whether or not you might be taking on a religion class just to fill out your schedule, or whether or not you are properly motivated to catechise, or whether or not the best textbooks are being used. No, the challenge is much more basic. It has to do with making God present in the lives of our young people. We might claim, of course, that this must rather be done within a parish context. A person needs to be socialised into a Christian community before he/she is ready to appropriate the gospel message in a personal way. But shouldn't Catholic schools be Christian communities? Would you describe your school as a Christian community, and, if it is not, are you ready to take up the challenge to make it one?

This issue can throw us back on ourselves and our own Christian journey. When it comes to the task of making the gospel our own, we all have our own stories to tell. None of us is completely there yet, I suppose. But the primary story is our own faith tradition. When we celebrate that story, for example in the Eucharist, we are moved by the memory of the central story of our faith, and God is moved by the memory of it too. And because of that the celebration becomes a saving event for us.

Prayerful celebrations of faith are very important in building up Christian community. The corporate quest for God has a power to it that is different from any individual effort. But perhaps we need to ask ourselves first of all, where and when is the nourishment of our own faith taking place? Are we conscious of the meaning of the Christian tradition as it relates to our lives in the present? Among many people today there's been a tendency to narrow down the meaning of the Gospel to such things as being nice, helping someone who is sick, donating to the poor.

Of course, these things are all very good and commendable, but what we need to bear in mind is

unbelievers also do them, and sometimes better than we! If, on the other hand, we want to come to the authentic spirit of the Gospel, we must come to the Cross. The dyings and risings, the sufferings and joys, of our daily lives must find their meaning in the dying and rising of Jesus. Have we begun to reflect on this mystery of our faith, and incorporate it into our daily lives? Nobody can give away what he/she doesn't have. Formation of children in the faith happens when catechists have experienced the Christian mystery in their own lives and are ready to bring others into that mystery. What we know about the Gospel and teachings of the Church is important, but WHO we are as disciples of Jesus, where we are on our own journey, and what degree of awareness we have about that journey is even more important. We won't be fully ready for the catechist's task until we have done some serious reflection on our Christian tradition, extracted from it the vision of the Christian life that it incorporates, and then taken a critical look at how our own decisions and actions and attitudes measure up to that standard. This is a challenging task.

Another way of looking at our catechetical mission is that of forming a Catholic identity among our students. Teenagers especially are interested in pursuing identity issues: that's one of the chief reasons they join groups. But this task can apply to every age. The two main factors in identity development are (a) faithfulness to values; and (b) faithfulness to persons or relationships.

The greatest challenge to the first factor, faithfulness to values, lies in the fact that our society puts a very confusing value-system (if it may be called that) before young people today. Most of all, self-discipline is not presented as a value. It has become clouded over by slogans about self-expression and self-development and self-fulfilment that often seem to suggest that the best way forward for young people is to be found in shaking off restraints and following their own inclinations. But there's a close connection between self-discipline and accepting the limitation of boundaries on the one hand, and inner peace and happiness on the other. Without boundaries there can be no identity development. Inner strength grows when a young person comes up against boundaries and learns to deal with that experience in a positive manner.

All this may be related to Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. I've often thought that the introductory lines of the Sermon on the Mount would make a greater impression on young people than the "thou shalt not" of the commandments. They will always rebel against negative commands but "blessed or happy are the poor" is a different matter. The essence of Jesus' teaching here is the positive message that we will be truly, inwardly happy if we do not allow a love of material things to take control of us, and if we can share what we have. Or take "blessed are the peacemakers"; again, the essence of this teaching is that we will find joy and happiness in valuing and promoting peaceful relations between people and nations and that those who believe that we will have more peace by having more war are blind. Yes, the values expressed in the Sermon on the Mount demand much self-discipline, but that self-discipline becomes easier to embrace when it is motivated by an ideal and a value with which young people can identify.

The second factor in identity development that I mentioned is faithfulness to persons or relationships. Interpersonal trust is something a child learns at a very early age from its interaction with parents. Of course, many children of dysfunctional families have great difficulty learning it. It's hard for them to trust people, and this disability may affect them for the rest of their lives. For example, so many children have trouble trusting a male adult because their own fathers have proved to be untrustworthy. A Catholic school can provide a trust-filled environment, where a young person learns that he/she can depend on a teacher and trust a

teacher, where some of a child's roundedness in this area may find healing. Most children who are trusted will respond with trust, and the atmosphere of trust in the classroom will grow.

This issue of trust is all-important when it comes to faith, because faith is a form of trust. Jesus won people over to faith, not by handing them a list of teachings, but by inviting them to entrust themselves to him and to the care of his heavenly Father. The ability to surrender one's life to the Reign of God is a kind of faith that builds upon a person's ability to trust. A person who has learned to trust will be able to reach out in trust to God.

A final point – catechesis also responds to the human search for meaning. People who trust in the idols of the culture – whether success, pleasure, fame, wealth or power, sooner or later discover the emptiness of their lives, and many of them come to grief in bitterness, alcoholism or depression. A catechist's task is to teach young people that the basic foundation for a meaningful life is God's call at baptism. The early life of a disciple of Jesus Christ should be an exciting search for an answer to the question, 'What does God want me to do with my life?' That answer gradually unfolds for us as we grow up, if we're open to it. Of course, many people are not open to it. They simply make their own choices without any reference to what God's call might be, and then conclude that what they chose is actually what God wants for them. That's not necessarily so. An understanding catechist can make the question of God's call really come alive for young people, so that their gifts and talents, joys and sufferings, gains and losses, opportunities, successes and even failures become part of a journey that reveals to them God's love and ongoing presence in their lives.

To sum up then: I began this presentation by focusing first of all, not on religious education, but on the catechists who do it. I pointed out that "lighting the way" is a scriptural mandate. Just as the Lord lit the way for the man born blind – in the same way, it's our task to make the blind see, that is, to share our experience of God with those for whom God is not yet real. I then talked about the spirit of the Second Vatican Council, and specifically, its desire to get away from the use of power language and use instead the language of persuasion. I raised the issue of what we are actually doing as catechists, the challenge of sharing with others our own experience. That led to the suggestion that Catholic schools should be Christian communities, leading to a reflection on when and where the nourishment of our own faith is taking place. I pointed out that doing good works is highly commendable, but what marks out our spirituality as specifically Christian is when we're willing to come to the Cross – when the Cross is actually giving meaning to the dyings and risings - the failures and successes - of our daily lives. Finally, I discussed other challenges of catechesis, e.g., the challenge of forming a Catholic identity in students with its dual tasks of faithfulness to values and persons, and concluded by examining briefly the role of catechesis as supplying meaning for a person's life.