

# *Delivering the Deposit of Faith*

## *Organic & Systematic Catechesis*

Throughout the *Catechism* you'll see a call for catechesis that is organic and systematic. This emphasis is rooted in the direction given by Pope John Paul II:

In his closing speech at the fourth general assembly of the synod, Pope Paul VI rejoiced "to see how everyone drew attention to the absolute need for systematic catechesis, precisely because it is this reflective study of the Christian mystery that fundamentally distinguishes catechesis from all other ways of presenting the Word of God."

In view of practical difficulties, attention must be drawn to some of the characteristics of this instruction:

- ↳ It must be systematic, not improvised but programmed to reach a precise goal
- ↳ It must deal with essentials, without any claim to tackle all disputed questions or to transform itself into theological research or scientific exegesis;
- ↳ It must nevertheless be sufficiently complete ...;
- ↳ It must be an integral Christian initiation, open to all the other factors of Christian life.

I am not forgetting the interest of the many different occasions for catechesis connected with personal, family, social and ecclesial life ... *but I am stressing the need for organic and systematic Christian instruction, because of the tendency in various quarters to minimize its importance* (CT 21, emphasis added; see also GDC 66, 241).

### **What does Pope John Paul II mean by organic and systematic?**

**Organic** implies interconnected parts. Think of the human body. The heart, stomach, and brain cannot function alone. Each system of the human body is meticulously designed to function in concert with every other part. Equally important: damage to any one organ sets in motion eventual damage to others within the living whole.

In like manner, the Deposit of Faith is organic. *Every doctrine is logically and intimately tied to every other teaching.* Those who have studied Catholic doctrine have a profound appreciation for its organic nature. The organic nature of the faith demands that it be presented in a way that helps people connect individual truths together to see a larger reality. Doctrines should be taught with an eye to what will be unfolded in future sessions. Conversely, subsequent teaching must go back to earlier teaching to forge connections and strengthen those already made.

**Systematic** catechesis is a gradual, incremental and orderly presentation of the teachings of the Church. Inquirers need to understand certain truths first in order to be able to comprehend others. This is called the hierarchy of truths. Catechesis that is delivered according to the hierarchy of truths does not mean that some teachings have more or less importance than others, but rather that Catholic teachings order themselves systematically around these five foundational truths:

**1) The Trinity** — "The internal structure of catechesis: every mode of presentation must always be Christocentric-Trinitarian: Through Christ to the Father in the Holy Spirit. If catechesis lacks these three elements or neglects their close relationship, the Christian message can certainly lose its proper character" (GDC 100).

**2) The Person of Jesus** — “Jesus Christ not only transmits the Word of God: he *is* the Word of God. Catechesis is therefore completely tied to him. Thus what must characterize the message transmitted by catechesis is, above all, its ‘Christocentricity’” (GDC 98).

**3) The Paschal Mystery** — “The baptismal catechumenate is also completely permeated by the *mystery of Christ’s Passover*. For this reason, all initiation must reveal clearly its Paschal nature. The Easter Vigil, focal point of the Christian liturgy, and its spirituality of Baptism inspire all catechesis” (GDC 91).

**4) The Dignity of the Human Person** — The mystery of the human person is presented throughout the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* ... This doctrine, contemplated in the light of the humanity of Jesus, the perfect man, demonstrates the highest vocation and the ideal of perfection to which every human person is called” (GDC 128).

**5) The Church as Christ’s Mystical Body** — “Catechesis is an essentially ecclesial act. The true subject of catechesis is the Church which, continuing the mission of Jesus the Master and, therefore animated by the Holy Spirit, is sent to be the teacher of the faith” (GDC 78).

Catechists have the opportunity to lead those on the journey of faith to come to the breathtaking realization that God loves them and will continue to love them regardless of what they have done or think they have done. In this *understanding* of God, RCIA participants can then perceive the generous call of God beyond justice to mercy, the call to *change*. In this hope alone can mere humanity be opened to the call to and the pursuit of divinization. By the time the elect and candidates stand facing the priest who will impart to them the saving graces of the sacraments, each participant should feel that the catechesis given during the RCIA process has, above all, been for them the *Word of God spoken* to those who have been graced with ears to hear their Lord (understanding), to lead them to the *Word of God made flesh* for those who have been given hearts to embrace their Lord (change).

The goal of catechumenal catechesis is therefore not only imparting that which must be believed. It seeks also to prepare participants for a new union, an embrace. This embrace is human and divine, unifying the two as water into wine, inviting participants to thereby quench the deepest call of relationship that Jesus gives — “*I thirst*” (Jn 19:28).

### Teaching the Keys to the Deposit of Faith

This is the longest period of the Christian initiation process. It is also the most densely catechetical. The principal guideline for this period is found in the *RCIA ritual book*: “A suitable catechesis is provided by priests or deacons, or by catechists and others of the faithful, planned to be gradual and complete in its coverage, accommodated to the liturgical year, and solidly supported by celebrations of the Word. This catechesis leads the catechumens not only to an appropriate acquaintance with dogmas and precepts but also to a profound sense of the mystery of salvation in which they desire to participate” (para. 75.1). The catechetical component of this period is a complete delivery of the Deposit of Faith. Complete does not mean *exhaustive*. For example, it would be impossible to explain everything about the Blessed Virgin Mary — every particular development in doctrine drawn from statements made by popes or councils. Nor could a catechist do this with any other doctrine of the Church. What can be done is to explain the *keys* of the Deposit of Faith as they are found in Scripture and Tradition.

These “keys” help participants to unlock these mysteries so that they can return to them time and time again for further study and deeper prayer. A good guide for these “keys” is the *Credo of the People of God*, a modern-day creed promulgated by Pope Paul VI in 1965 (see CT 28). It is an official summary statement of the crucial truths that must be taught. The means to accomplish delivering these “keys” through a systematic and organic unfolding of the Deposit of Faith is the subject of Sections Five and Six of the *RCIA Catechist’s Manual*. (You were already assigned to read this material in two exercises in Chapter 4 of this course. Discerning the keys to doctrines is addressed in greater detail in Chapters 13 and 14 of this course.)

The work of unfolding the Deposit of Faith is certainly begun in the period of the precatechumenate, but a certain crucial emphasis exists in the period of the catechumenate, to ensure that “a thoroughly comprehensive catechesis on the truths of Catholic doctrine and moral life” is given to participants (*RCIA ritual book*, Appendix III, U.S. National Statutes for the Catechumenate, 7).

### **Pitfalls in Teaching Doctrines**

In the period of the catechumenate, as the Deposit of Faith is unfolded, temptations arise that can severely hobble the success of your catechesis. Some of these are highlighted below, each with an accompanying exercise to give you practice in anticipating and avoiding these pitfalls. These pitfalls are less likely to be a problem in the precatechumenate because you are presenting the basic Gospel message, which is less susceptible to becoming detached from some of the “basics” noted below simply because it is narrative by nature. Catechesis in the period of the catechumenate is much more likely to become “academic” in ways that can divorce the truths of the faith from the needs, doubts, and hopes of RCIA participants, as well as from the larger context of the story of salvation itself.

#### **1) Not Showing How the Truths of the Faith Help Believers Draw Closer to God**

It is a common temptation to present a doctrine as something that should be fleshed out in an RCIA session in the same way that it is presented in a catechism.

For example, in teaching the Ten Commandments you might want to make sure you’ve covered all ten, named the list of sins against each, identified virtues and vices related to each, etc. Catechisms are full of “lists” — three of this, four of that, seven of many things — that seem eminently suited to a teaching outline. You would find yourself teaching the truths of the faith like any other form of knowledge, the “what” overwhelming the “why.”

Pope John Paul II wrote that the “definitive aim of catechesis is to put people not only in touch but in communion, in intimacy, with Jesus Christ: only he can lead us to the love of the Father in the Spirit and make us share in the life of the Holy Trinity” (CT 5).

To help guard yourself against this pitfall, ask yourself the following question when preparing each of your teachings: *By the end of this RCIA teaching on... [you fill in the doctrine] ...will it be clear to participants how this aspect of our Catholic faith will help them love God more deeply?*

#### **2) Losing Sight of the Fact That These Truths Are Not Ends in Themselves**

When Jesus walked the earth, he proclaimed that the Kingdom of Heaven was at hand (see, for example, Mt 4:17, Mk 1:15, Lk 4:43, Jn 3:3). We were made to spend an eternity in the intimate embrace of the Triune God who is love. *Every truth* revealed by God is given to help us attain the one purpose of our existence:

Catechesis transmits this message of the kingdom, so central to the preaching of Jesus. In doing so, the message “is gradually deepened, developed in its implicit consequences,” and thus manifests its great repercussions for man and the world. In its drawing out the Gospel *kerygma* of Jesus, catechesis underlines the following basic aspects: Jesus, with the kingdom, proclaims and reveals that God is not a distant inaccessible Being, “a remote power without a name” but a Father, who is present among his creatures and whose power is his love. This testimony about God as Father, offered in a simple and direct manner, is fundamental to catechesis. Jesus shows, at the same time, that God, with the coming of his kingdom offers the gift of integral salvation, frees from sin, brings one to communion with the Father, grants divine sonship, and in conquering death, promises eternal life (GDC 101-102).

Thus, presenting a truth of the faith as something that has value unconnected with God’s purpose in revealing it can transform that truth into an abstraction, something that is interesting, perhaps exciting, but not vitally important to a participant’s very existence.

To help guard yourself against this pitfall, ask yourself the following question when preparing each of your teachings: *By the end of this RCIA teaching on... [you fill in the doctrine] ...will it be clear to participants how this aspect of our Catholic faith will help them attain eternal life?*

### 3) *Failing to Keep the Deposit of Faith in the Context of Spiritual Warfare*

As catechists, we need always to keep in mind the story of our first parents, the intimacy with God violated and destroyed by sin; as we read in the Book of Wisdom, “*God created man for incorruption, and made him in the image of his own eternity, but through the Devil’s envy death entered the world, and those who belong to his party experience it*” (Wis 2:23-24). And St. Peter reminds us that “*your adversary the Devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking some one to devour*” (1 Pt 5:8). Failing to keep in view Satan’s powerful and unrelenting attempts to derail the movement of participants toward God is akin to putting defenseless lambs at the mercy of St. Peter’s roaring lion. Pope Paul VI asks catechists to help these lambs become combatants themselves in the endless war against the power of sin and death by means of their own strengthening self-denial and acceptance of suffering:

This kingdom and this salvation, which are the key words of Jesus Christ’s evangelization, are available to every human being as grace and mercy, and yet at the same time each individual must gain them by force — they belong to the violent, says the Lord, through toil and suffering, through a life lived according to the Gospel, through abnegation and the cross, through the spirit of the beatitudes (EN 10).

To help guard yourself against this pitfall, ask yourself the following question when preparing each of your teachings: *By the end of this RCIA teaching on... (you fill in the doctrine) ...will it be clear to participants how this aspect of our Catholic faith will help them combat sin and Satan in their lives?*

### 4) *Insufficiently Connecting Doctrines to Real-World Experiences*

Some people come to RCIA with many kinds of sin, failure, sorrow, and disappointment in their lives. They can unrealistically expect that “joining a church” will somehow make everything all right, that the pain will go away and that their former lives can be forgotten. Others come to RCIA thinking that their life is “OK” or “pretty good,” but hoping that becoming a Catholic will make things even better, that perhaps going to church more regularly will make them feel more “spiritual.” There are many variations on these themes; all have in common the unrecognized necessity to change, to “*walk in newness of life*” (Rom 6:4), to “*put on Christ*” (Gal 3:27) regardless of what it might cost while fully expecting that it will lead to unimagined joy. Pope John Paul II reminds us catechists:

No one will deny that this instruction must be given to form patterns of Christian living and not to remain only notional (EN 44). It is useless to play off orthopraxis against orthodoxy: Christianity is inseparably both. Firm and well-thought-out convictions lead to courageous and upright action; the endeavor to educate the faithful to live as disciples of Christ today calls for and facilitates a discovery in depth of the mystery of Christ in the history of salvation. It is also quite useless to campaign for the abandonment of serious and orderly study of the message of Christ in the name of a method concentrating on life experience. No one can arrive at the whole truth on the basis solely of some simple private experience, that is to say without an adequate explanation of the message of Christ, who is “*the way, and the truth, and the life*” (Jn. 14:6). Nor is any opposition to be set up between a catechesis taking life as its point of departure and a traditional, doctrinal and systematic catechesis. Authentic catechesis is always an orderly and systematic initiation into the revelation that God has given of himself to humanity in Christ Jesus, a revelation stored in the depths of the Church’s memory and in Sacred Scripture, and constantly communicated from one generation to the next by a living active “Tradition.” This revelation is not however isolated from life or artificially juxtaposed to it. It is concerned with the ultimate meaning of life and it illuminates the whole of life with the light of the Gospel, to inspire it or to question it (CT 22).

To help guard yourself against this pitfall, ask yourself the following question when preparing each of your teachings: *By the end of this RCIA teaching on... (you fill in the doctrine) ...will it be clear to participants how this aspect of our Catholic faith will help them perceive the call to holiness within the sufferings, joys, and experiences of daily life?*