

Father Ronald Ketteler serves as Director of Ecumenism and of Continuing Education of Priests, Episcopal Liaison to the diocesan newspaper, the Messenger. He is also former Chair of the Humanities Division at Thomas More College. These columns appeared originally in the Messenger.



Catechesis in Today's Cultural Context

More than four decades ago, *Gaudium et Spes* ("The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World," 1965) identified the "Proper Development of Culture" among the urgent problems of the day. In the spirit of its optimistic reading of the "signs of the time," the Pastoral Constitution referred to the profound cultural changes of the era as enjoying the potential to inaugurate "a new age in history." (GS nn. 53-62)

While the direction of progress in the post-war decades did seem to be a hopeful sign of humankind's pursuit of justice and peace, the phenomenon in itself remained ambiguous. In spite of the encouraging factors on the worldwide stage, questions were still open-ended concerning the long range implications of this new found consciousness of freedom and autonomy on the part of the world's peoples.

From one perspective, the Pastoral Constitution affirmed that the evolution of these values can "provide some preparation for the acceptance of the message of the gospel—a preparation which can be animated by divine love by Him who came to save the world." That affirmation, however, was qualified by realistic cautions. (GS n. 57)

In discussing the relationship between faith and culture, *Gaudium et Spes* acknowledged the historical influence of the Church on cultures over the centuries. Nonetheless, harmony between faith and culture has not been an easy task, for in any age culture will pose distinctive challenges for Christian formation. The dark side of these trends centered

on the question whether this "new humanism" would be driven towards establishing a condition antithetical to religion, a secular humanism. (GS n. 56)

Within a few years the impact of the cultural revolutions of the late 1960s, especially in the West, would inevitably temper the enthusiasm for development which had been sparked in the early 1960s.

Both the positive and the negative effects of given cultures intersect with the Church's mission in evangelization and catechesis.

After the Third Synod of Bishops in 1975, Pope Paul VI issued his apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi* ("On Evangelization in the Modern World," 1975). A now time-honored passage in that document enunciated a foundational insight into the relationship between culture and evangelization: "The split between the Gospel and culture is without doubt the drama of our time, just as it was of other times." The mission of evangelization, therefore, calls for "a full evangelization of culture, or more correctly cultures" since cultures must be "regenerated by an encounter with the Gospel." (EN n. 20)

In addition, *Evangelii Nuntiandi* categorized catechetics among the fundamental methods of evangelization and called for a pastoral need for providing systematic religious instruction. (EN n. 44)

In recent decades, the literature on the pros and cons concerning the split between the Gospel and culture as well as the ensuing challenges for Chris-

The Catholic Conference of Kentucky (CCK) is an agency of the Catholic Bishops of Kentucky, established in 1968. It speaks for the Church in matters of public policy, serves as liaison to government and the legislature, and coordinates communications and activities between the church and secular agencies. There are 406,000 Catholics in the Commonwealth. The Bishops of the four dioceses of KY constitute CCK's Board of Directors.

tian formation has become extensive.

For example, in the 1990s Cardinal Avery Dulles participated in a forum sponsored by the Woodstock Theological Center on the theme "The Gospel and Culture: Narrowing the Gap." Cardinal Dulles hypothesized that the gap between Gospel and culture on the national horizon was continuing to widen. Consequently many believers experience their faith being undermined by a cultural milieu laden with relativism, individualism, hedonism, and consumerism.

The *National Catechetical Directory* (2005) for the Catholic Church in the United States summarizes the dominant social and cultural conditions that catechesis must take into account. The following aspects are numbered among those elements: the widespread secularism that can undermine Catholic culture and identity, religious indifference and ambiguity, the burgeoning of cults, sects, and the New Age movement. Moreover, there is a pressing pastoral task to involve adults in lifelong formation and religious education and to engage young adults in their distinctive cultural milieu.

The Directory also outlines the general operative values on the cultural scene in the United States: 1) freedom, 2) religious freedom, 3) economic freedom, 4) pragmatism, 5) interest in science and technology, 6) globalization, and 7) mobility. All these values embody potential blocks to effective evangelization and catechesis.

Four years after *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, Pope John Paul II's apostolic exhortation *Catechesi Tradendae* ("On Catechesis in Our Time, 1979) was published after the next Synod of Bishops. The Fourth Synod of Bishops specifically studied catechetics and again confirmed the link between evangelization and catechesis. In a word, catechesis is an integral moment in evangelization as a process. (CT n. 18)

What is catechesis? The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1997) defines catechesis with a direct quote from *Catechesi Tradendae*: "Catechesis is an *education in the faith* of children, young people, and adults which includes especially the teaching of Christian

doctrine imparted, generally speaking, in an organic and systematic way, with a view to initiating the hearers into the fullness of Christian life." (CT 18; CCC n. 5)

In a similar fashion, the *United States Catholic Catechism for Adults* (2006) views catechesis as "[t]he act of handing on the Word of God intended to inform the faith community and candidates for initiation into the teachings of Christ, transmitted by the Apostles to the Church. It involves the life-long effort of forming people into witnesses to Christ and opening their hearts to the spiritual transformation given by the Holy Spirit." (Glossary, 506)

In general, two traits indigenous to the American psyche can create relatively common obstacles to catechesis: 1) "cultural relativism" which views all truth as culturally conditioned and, 2) the lack of religious knowledge due to insufficient formation and catechesis.

In October 2006 Archbishop Donald Wuerl of Washington, D.C. addressed the broader context of catechesis/evangelization in "What a Catechist Is and Does" at the archdiocese's catechetical convocation. Archbishop Wuerl observed that many young people today do not actively dismiss Church doctrine. Rather, the root of the problem might be more a matter of religious illiteracy.

Evangelization/catechesis are carried out in a cultural climate of "the American mindset": "That way of life is arguably more individual than communal, more competitive than cooperative and generally more self-focused than other-directed."

Such a mentality militates against a receptivity to an ecclesial identity with a church "that pre-exists the decision of individual members to bring into being, a church that claims to bind conscience and a church that expects more from Sunday worship than a warm sense of being comfortable."

A second cultural indicator is evidenced in a growing "disintegration of community and social structures that once supported religious faith and encouraged family life." Undoubtedly, the diminishment of social bonds

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has had a negative impact on an openness to accept revealed doctrine "that cannot be changed by democratic process and to follow an absolute moral imperative that is not the result of prior popular approbation."

Since a weakened confessional identity often correlates with deficient catechesis, Archbishop Wuerl points out the hurdles involved in calling "people to an understanding of the unchanging nature of revelation." Not surprisingly, inadequate catechesis can likewise impede "the ability of the church to bind people in conscience when they do not have an understanding of the antecedent nature of revealed truth and therefore moral norms."

While this cultural state of affairs poses a significant challenge to catechesis, at the same time it represents an opportune moment for the "new evangelization."

In spite of the negative side of the cultural malaise, positive signs also co-exist on the horizon. A hunger for God in the depths of the hearts of men and women, the yearning for a fullness that "can only be found in God" have not been eradicated. This natural orientation of persons to the infinite and the transcendent is rooted in our very being. It is witnessed to by "the uneasiness, sense of unfulfillment and dissatisfaction that characterize the struggle in life if God and the spiritual dimension of life are excluded." The ensuing spiritual vacuum can trigger an awareness that "money, self-satisfaction, power and other finite realities can be temporary substitutes and provide us with limited happiness."

In reality, the seeds of faith can be discovered "in the human longing for completion, fulfillment and satisfaction—for God."

Archbishop Wuerl is confident that this point in time is "a new moment for catechesis that demands a clear and unambiguous focus on the proclamation of authentic Catholic faith."

His hope for new initiatives in catechesis is "not a groundless euphoria but a confidence that God continues to grace the Church with new opportunities to reach deep within our own lived experience of Jesus to

find the practical means to introduce a whole new generation into the knowledge—into the encounter with the living Lord."

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A Postscript on Catechesis and the Social Teaching of the Church

In calling for catechetical efforts to develop Christian or evangelical virtues, *Catechesi Tradendae* (1979) acknowledges "the concern of catechesis not to omit but to clarify properly realities such as man's activity for his integral liberation, the search for a society with greater solidarity and fraternity, the fight for justice and the building of peace." (CT n. 29)

The General Directory for Catechesis (1997) notes that by placing proper catechetical emphasis on Church social teaching "the Church desires to stir Christian hearts 'to the cause of justice,' to a 'preferential option or love for the poor,' so that her presence may really be light that shines and salt that cures." (GCD n. 17)

One form of the ministry of the word that is engaged in the continuing education of the faith centers on "[a] Christian reading of events which is required of the missionary vocation of the Christian community." In this regard, the study of Church social teaching becomes "indispensable, since 'its aim is to interpret these realities, determining their conformity with or divergence from the lines of Gospel teaching.'" [GCD n.71. See *On Social Concern* (1987): n. 41; *Centesimus Annus* (1991): n. 5, nn. 53-62 ...]

In Chapter 6—"Catechesis for Life in Christ," the *National Directory for Catechesis*, issued by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops in 2005, includes "Principles of Catholic Social Teaching" within the scope of moral formation. (43 C, p. 170-171). In particular, the National Directory states that "[c]atechesis on the seventh and tenth commandments focuses on social and economic justice, for 'social justice is an integral part of evangelization, a constitutive dimension of preaching the gospel, and an essential part of the Church's mission.'" (45 G, pp.

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The *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* (2004) treats of catechesis and Church social teaching under the heading of "Social doctrine and formation in Chapter 12—"Social Action and Ecclesial Action." The Compendium collates several guidelines gleaned from magisterial documents on catechesis and formation in relationship to Church social doctrine (CSDC nn. 528-533):

528. The Church's social doctrine is an indispensable reference point for a totally integrated Christian formation. ...

529. The formative value of the Church's social doctrine should receive more attention in catechesis. ...

530. In the context of catechesis above all it is important that the teaching of the Church's social doctrine be directed towards motivating action for evangelization and humanization of temporal realities. ...

531. The Church's social doctrine must be

the basis of an intense and constant work of formation, especially of the lay faithful. Such a formation should take into account their obligations in civil society. ...

532. Catholic educational institutions can and indeed must carry out a precious formative service, dedicating themselves in a particular way to the inculturation of the Christian message, that is to say, to the productive encounter between the Gospel and the various branches of knowledge. ...

Paragraph 533 of the Compendium treats of "the commitment to use the Church's social doctrine in the formation of priests and candidates to the priesthood, who, in the context of their preparation for ministry, must develop a thorough knowledge of the Church's teaching and her pastoral concerns in the social sphere as well as a keen interest in the social issues of the day."

Postscript April 16, 2007