

# Catechesis in POLAND

THE CHALLENGE OF PROVIDING AUTHENTIC CATHOLIC FORMATION

In each Catholic community the essential features of a Catholic approach to formation need to take root in the local soil, a soil that is specific to that environment. The challenges to the local church always revolve around how to engage fruitfully and creatively with this environment, so that Christians can come to maturity in an authentic way.

The early stages of Christian formation are particularly affected in post-Christian secularized societies – and this is increasingly the way to describe contemporary Polish society – by three main challenges:

1. Relativism – and its rejection of objective truth, especially in the area of religious belief.
2. The belief that all ways to God are equal and therefore there is nothing special about Christianity or Catholicism in particular.
3. A generally negative view of the Church, with the separation of notions of so-called ‘spirituality’ from what is described as ‘institutional religion’.

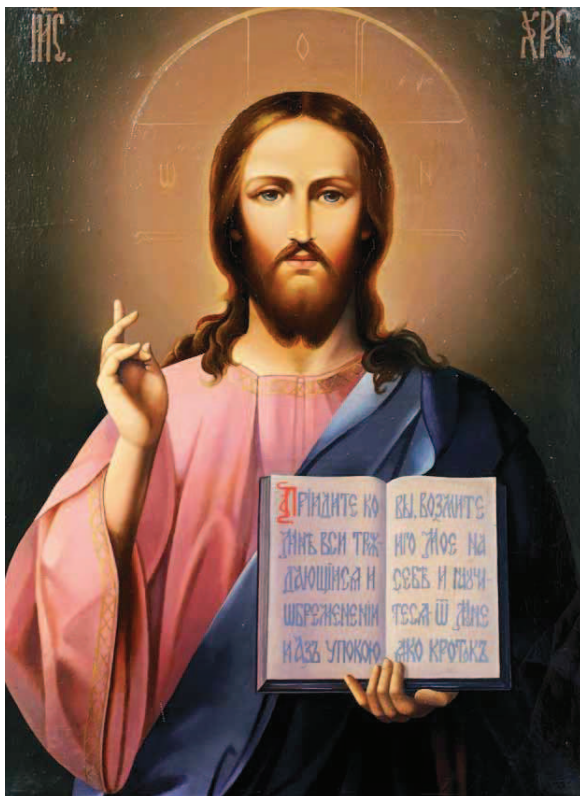
To these, the Church brings to bear her understanding of the process of formation in the Faith. This process can be thought of as having four basic stages. A fuller recognition of these stages in Polish catechetics would, to my mind, assist greatly in the Church's work of transmission of the Faith.

## Stage 1: Pre-evangelization

Many people who do not consider themselves as believers fail to ponder upon the spiritual dimension of their life and do not feel the need for religion in their life.<sup>1</sup> A considerable percentage of population also has a negative image of Christianity and the Catholic Church, promoted by the media. Consequently, even if they discover in themselves the need of God, it does not necessarily mean that they will look for Him in the Catholic Church. For these reasons, the stage of pre-evangelization should precede the stage of evangelization in the strict sense and aim to open hearts and minds of people to the reception of the Good News and to surmount prejudices against Christianity and the Catholic Church. The basis for pre-evangelization is *Christian testimony* understood as the active, loving presence of Christians in the secularized world, as John Paul II says in *Redemptoris missio*: ‘People today put more trust in witnesses than in teachers, in experience than in teaching, and in life and action than in theories. The witness of a Christian life is the first and irreplaceable form of mission.’<sup>2</sup>

The stage of pre-evangelization aims to open hearts and minds to the Good news and to facilitate the overcoming of prejudices.

The content of the pre-evangelical mission should focus on the pursuit of objective truth about the world and man; the interpretation of personal experience<sup>3</sup> and the credibility of Christianity and the Catholic Church.<sup>4</sup> The first two groups of issues concentrate on making people more sensitive to the spiritual and transcendent dimension of human life and, in this way, prepare the ground for the proclamation of the Good News. Attention is drawn here to the phenomena coming from



both the external world and the person's internal life, which cannot be explained without the recognition of the existence of a transcendent efficient cause.

Classical arguments for the existence of God<sup>5</sup> as well as internal experience, i.e. love, friendship, suffering, or beauty (art, music),<sup>6</sup> can help someone to open towards an otherworldly reality. On the other hand, in the apologetic dimension of pre-evangelization, historical arguments for the credibility of Christianity and the Catholic Church should be presented, formed in such a manner so that people can become more open to the Gospel proclaimed in this Church.

*True evangelization has the words and deeds of Christ at its centre*

The essential features of formation need to take root in the local soil

## Stage 2: Evangelisation

Pope Paul VI writes: ‘The Good News proclaimed by the witness of life sooner or later has to be proclaimed by the word of life. There is no true evangelization if the name, the teaching, the life, the promises, the kingdom and the mystery of Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of God are not proclaimed.’<sup>7</sup> Therefore, pre-evangelization is not enough when people begin to open to the pursuit of God. The time will come for evangelization in the strict sense. At this stage, people would need to hear the most basic Christian message, i.e. the *kerygma*, which is at the same time a call for an answer of faith and conversion.

Christian tradition over the centuries attests to the fact that the proclamation of the *kerygma* is the most basic and indispensable step towards the faith. The content of the *kerygma* comprises the most important redeeming events, the truth about God's coming to man in the person of Jesus Christ who frees us from our sins and makes us sons and daughters of the Father. In the centre of those events is Christ's resurrection, which particularly needs to be emphasised. Equally important as the content is the form of the proclamation. This should be based on the narration of a witness who has himself experienced God's love and who calls others to follow His voice.<sup>8</sup> Because of this, *proclaimers of the kerygma* are to be of lively and profound faith, possess the knowledge of the *kerygma* and have the ability to narrate convincingly. It is more likely then (taking into account that faith is a gift from God) that evangelization may result in conversion.

*The proclamation of the kerygma is the most basic and indispensable step towards faith and conversion*

## Stage 3: Catechesis as an integral transmission of faith

Once a thirst for Christ has been awakened, catechesis in the strict sense needs to be available. This is understood as systematic, integral faith formation that is organic and comprehensive.<sup>9</sup>

People who, through pre-evangelization, have become open to the reception of the Good News and who, in the period of evangelization, have converted, need to be formed in all aspects of the Catholic faith. For this, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* is a fundamental reference point.

The lack of effectiveness of such catechesis currently results mostly from the fact that it is not preceded by pre-evangelization and evangelization and, consequently, it is addressed to people who are indifferent or non-believing. Alternatively, especially with children and sacramental preparation, catechetical periods may be focused on the subject areas more suitable in pre-evangelization and evangelization and so catechesis in the true sense does not take place.

## Stage 4: Mystagogical catechesis

The Constitution *Sacrosanctum Concilium* says: ‘Before men can come to the liturgy they must be called to faith and to conversion.’<sup>10</sup> After pre-evangelization and evangelization a very crucial stage of catholic formation should be then the discovery of the sacraments. Some help could be provided in this matter by mystagogical catechesis showing the importance of rituals, explaining their theological message and existential consequences of their reception.<sup>11</sup> It allows us to discover the richness of the liturgy and our involvement in it. Mystagogical catechesis today is an indispensable form of catechesis but it should involve liturgical celebrations where people can experience the truths, which they have been exposed to in their catechesis.

Very important for the implementation of this model of formation which I have sketched here is, in principle, the correct sequence of the listed elements, namely pre-evangelization before evangelization, with catechesis transferring the synthesis of the whole deposit of faith, followed by mystagogical catechesis. This wise model of the Church gives and allows for the natural needs of growth in the faith and a continuing deepening conversion. Achieving this in practice is, of course, a challenging matter! ■

## NOTES

1. See Sr Hyacinthe Defos Du Rau, O.P. ‘Awaking the desire for God’, Part 1, *The Sower*, October-December 2000 pp.5-7.
2. John Paul II, *Redemptoris missio* 42.
3. See Vatican Council II, *Nostra aetate* 1; Paul VI, *Evangelii nuntiandi* 55; United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, National Directory for Catechesis, Washington DC 2000, p.40.
4. Cf. S. Bartnik, *Dogmatyka katolicka*, Lublin 1999 pp.545–549.
5. See E.T. Whittaker, *Space and Spirit: Theories of the Universe and the Arguments for Existence of God*, London 1946.
6. See J. Dillenberger, *A Theology of Aesthetic Sensibilities. The Visual Arts and the Church*, New York 1986.
7. Paul VI, *Evangelii nuntiandi* 22.
8. Cf. J.H. MacDonald, *Kerygma and Didache*, Cambridge 1980.
9. ‘...catechesis is an education of children, young people and adults in the faith, 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’, John Paul II, *Catechesi tradendae* 18, CCC 5.
10. Vatican Council II, *Sacrosanctum Concilium* 9.
11. See C.A. Satterlee, *Ambrose of Milan's Method of Mystagogical Preaching*, Collegeville 2002.

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