

The Catechist in the Light of “Antiquum ministerium”

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It is the intention of this contribution to explore various aspects of the historical development of the role of the catechist in the Catholic Church. It is also intended to show that changes in catechesis are normative in the Church’s history and that they occur whenever great societal changes take place.

Secondly, it will be teased out an emergence of the people involvement with catechesis in the historical context of the Church. First by the priests and the consecrated life brothers and sisters in many religious orders, suggesting that the involvement of the consecrated men and women in catechesis opened the way for non-consecrated laity to become formally involved in the Catholic education of the Church. De La Salle’s congregation will be briefly presented as a case study, and as just one of the many.

Preface

My practical experience as former director of the National Catechetical Centre in Lithuania, catechist, religious educator, and pastoral theologian made me aware of the importance of the vocation of the catechist and the instalment of the ministry of catechist in the Church. Furthermore, my personal political and catechetical experience in the context of the Russian communist dictatorship, where I worked as a member of the editorial board of the underground magazine “*The Chronicle of The Lithuanian Catholic Church*”, as well as my involvement in the subsequent processes of democratisation, made me aware of the impotence of the role of the lay catechist and religious educators in the Church. I feel honoured and grateful to be invited to the conference that is called to contribute to a remarkable historical event in the Catholic Church, the establishment of a “lay ministry of Catechist” by means of the apostolic letter, *Antiquum Ministerium* initiated and written by Pope Francis.¹

1. A brief History of the Development of Catechesis and the Role of the Catechist.

In his apostolic exhortation *Catechesi Tradendae* Pope St John Paul II said that the aim of catechesis is to help us to know Jesus – or to know him deeper so we can love him and live like him. Jesus is the One Who reveals to us the love of the Father in the Holy Spirit (CT). This then should lead into a full integration of the person into the life and ministry of the Church. The apostolic letter *Antiquum Ministerium*, states: *The ministry of Catechist in the*

¹ Apostolic Letter issued "MOTU PROPRIO" by the supreme Pontiff Francis, "ANTIQUUM MINISTERIUM", instituting the Ministry of Catechist. Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2021.

Church is an ancient one. Theologians commonly hold that the first examples are already present in the writings of the New Testament. (Cf. 1 Cor 12:28-31)''².

2. The timeline of catechesis in a 'nut-shell'.

Our first example of catechesis after the death and resurrection of Jesus comes in the Acts of the Apostles when we read of Peter speaking on Pentecost day:

“Men of Israel, hear these words: Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with mighty works and wonders and signs that God did through him in your midst, as you yourselves know this Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men. God raised him up, loosing the pangs of death, because it was not possible for him to be held by it” (Acts 2:22-24).

He spoke for a long time using many arguments and the result of this catechesis was that about 3000 people were baptised. What do we know about Peter as a first catechist? Is the word 'catechist' even appropriate in this context? He proclaimed resurrected Jesus, as Son of God. Potentially this allows us to call Peter a first Catechist in the dawn of the emergence of the Church. The role of catechist was entrusted to him by the Holy Spirit. Peter later became the first Bishop of Antioch, and of Rome. From that point of view, Peter was acting as a minister of the community of the followers of Jesus. Later, St. Paul, the apostle, strongly emphasised the importance of the lay followers of Jesus Christ encouraging them to take the Baptismal responsibility to spread the Word of God. He emphasised the value of the ministry of the lay catechist by saying: *“One who is being instructed in the word should share all good things with his instructor.”*³

Later, specific aspects of teaching were split off, as the ministry of the catechist. Today it has been recognized again as the Baptismal responsibility of lay people. This makes it clear that the role of the catechist in the Church is ancient and new. It is always developing and always needs to be checked against its ancient roots and its origin.

The power of transformation of the apostles is dramatically presented in the description of Pentecost in Acts of Apostles and in the journey to Emmaus: “They asked each other, “Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road (to Emmaus) and opened

² Apostolic Letter issued "MOTU PROPRIO" by the supreme Pontiff Francis, "*ANTIQUUM MINISTERIUM*", instituting the Ministry of Catechist. Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2021.

³ Gal. 6:6

the Scriptures to us?”⁴ Fully transformed by the power of the Holy Spirit, this was an overwhelming experience to them. One way of reading the story of the road to Emmaus, is as a paradigm story of catechesis: Jesus walks with those who are going in the wrong direction away from Jerusalem. This is an experience that needs to happen in any and every catechesis. The “AHA” moment, the transformation or conversion moment that happens by the openness of the person to the divine reality. This moment is an important element in catechesis. It needs to be recognised by the catechist and the person being catechised.

3. The First Century of Christianity: The Content of the First Catechesis

While St. Peter and St. Paul could be seen as the first catechists in the newly born Catholic Church, the systematic and formal training in catechesis developed only after the martyrdom of the Church, during the second and the third centuries. In the first century of Christianity, the *Didache*, one of the oldest catechetical sources, was produced. It was a short manual, which contained a summary of the teaching of the twelve apostles. The teaching contained Christian morality, liturgy, the Sermon on the Mount, the Ten Commandments, and the Lord’s Prayer. Only the apostles as well as their specially nominated followers were allowed to teach.

Later the Gospels were written, and it became the main source for catechesis. Luke wrote to Theophilus “so that you may know the truth concerning the things about which you have been *catechized*”⁵. And again, Luke introduces Apollos as a person who had been “instructed in the way of the Lord”⁶. A further development of understanding of the Gospels and the Acts of Apostles was needed and had been developed for the purposes of teaching converts.

John’s gospel begins with the journey of enquirers to Jesus and ends with an appeal to faith. Catechesis is concerned with the whole of Christian formation. Entire catechesis was centred around the becoming of a follower of Jesus Christ, which would culminate in a liturgy of Baptism⁷. Catechetical preparation was centred around Lent and the Easter (Baptismal) celebration. Whole of the local Church community stood behind the

⁴ Luke 24:13-35

⁵ LK-1-4

⁶ Acts 18:25.

⁷ Pilgrim- Leader’s Guide: *A course for the Christian Journey*. By Sharon Ely Pearson, Stephen Cottrell, Steven Croft, Paula Gooder, Robert Atwell. Church Publishing, NY, USA, 2020, pp. 9-10.

catechumens in support of their faith journey and the Baptismal celebration at Easter. This was essential mainly due to the difficult historical circumstances of the first two centuries of the Christian persecution. It was a costly and life-threatening thing to be a Christian⁸. Many of the first centuries Christians were caught, tortured, and brutally killed. Many of them became Martyrs of the early Church. A role of a lay catechist was significant in the Early days of the Church. Parents were the first and the most significant instruments in transmitting the faith to the family in the persecuted Church.

3.1 The 4th century of Christianity: Cyril of Jerusalem.

With the emergence and conversion of the Emperor Constantine to Catholicism in the 4th century and legislation favouring the Church, the idea of conversion into Catholicism remained central to catechesis and introduction in the Church. By the 4th century, catechesis was a term that describes teaching of catechumens, in most cases seeking conversion from ‘wrong or pagan culture’ into the Catholic faith⁹. The process of teaching was long, taught in the groups of the newly converted supported by the local Church community and called catechumenate. The teaching included pre-baptismal and post-baptismal instructions. From the writings of Cyril of Jerusalem in the 4th century, we can see that the Creed occupied a central place in the catechesis¹⁰. “As the Christian and civil populations increasingly became coextensive, the Christian Church experienced a process of accommodation of the culture whereby it and its societies interpenetrated one another”¹¹. These processes made conversion in some cases a Catholicism of a choice for social and cultural progression¹². The period of catechumenal instruction was shortened and mainly concentrated on the Lenten period.

3.2 Catechesis in the 5th century: St Augustine

An Early Catechism of the Catholic Church was written in the 5th century. St. Augustine of Hippo (354 – 430) was so influential in his works and his writings, that he is seen as a main instrument of God in shaping the catechetical tradition of the early Middle Ages¹³. St. Augustine is considered as one of the greatest Fathers of the early Church¹⁴. “Augustine’s adaptation of classical thought to Christian teaching created a theological

⁸ *Ibidem*.

⁹ *Encyclopedia of Early Christianity* – Second Edition. Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group. NY, USA, 1999, p. 287.

¹⁰ *Encyclopaedia of Early Christianity* – Second Edition. Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group. NY, USA, 1999, p. 288.

¹¹ *Ibid*.

¹² *Ibid*.

¹³ <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Saint-Augustine>. Acc. 11.08.2021

¹⁴ *Ibid*.

system of great power and lasting influence”¹⁵. Two of his numerous written works: “*Confessions*” (c. 400) and “*The City of God*” (c. 413–426), “shaped the practice of biblical exegesis and helped lay the foundation for much of medieval and modern Christian thought”¹⁶. After his death he was formally recognized as a doctor of the Church. His Catechism was written in response to a request to sum up the essentials of the Christian doctrine in the briefest possible form. St. Augustine’s catechism was centred around an explanation of the Christian faith: Hope, Faith and Charity. Augustine’s work centred around the creed, and then the Lord’s Prayer as recorded by Matthew, ending with the sacraments¹⁷. Throughout the history of the Church other catechisms were drawn and new catechetical models developed.

From about mid to the second part of the 5th century there was a decline in the adult catechumenate, which started to be replaced with a gradual introduction of infant baptism. By the start of the 6th century infant baptism became the norm in the Catholic Church. Sponsors or godparents were representing and witnessing the initiation into the Church for the infant or baptised child. They then became a guardian of the faith to the growing child. This then became a new form of lay individuals’ involvement in handling on the faith to the community of the faithful. The role of the ‘lay catechist’ in family settings remained very important during centuries.

3.3 Middle Ages: sacred art, literature, and biblical drama

The Middle Ages represent centuries of decisive evolution of Christianity as a dynamic factor in the formation of the European continent. By the end of the 9th century, the Creed had been seen as central to the catechesis. Memorisation of the Creed had been required from the catechumens. The sermons were mainly based on the Creed and remained a main source for catechesis. A question-answer catechetical instruction was widely used in teaching the faith. The right answers were memorised and learned. As time went on, the preaching of the priest became the main source for catechesis. This was complemented by religious art, music, pictures, statues, stained glass windows representing various scenes of the Biblical teaching. A mystery play became another way to educate people into the Christian faith. Later, with the

¹⁵ *Ibidem*.

¹⁶ *Ibid*.

¹⁷ The Augustine Catechism: *The Enchiridion on Faith Hope and Charity* (by St. Augustine (Author), B. Harbert (Translator), B. Ramsey (Preface). *The Augustine Series*, New City Press of T.H.E. Focolare, USA. Paperback – August 20, 2008, p. 34.

onset of printing, the situation started to change. The Church started to recognise a lack of uniformity and ignorance among the priests in doing catechesis. This led to the publication of many new manuals for teaching catechesis written by numerous theologians in Europe. The manuals were written to address a particular age group of catechumens: children and adults specifically. This was a great and new development in the Catholic Church in catechesis.

3.4. The period of the Reformation and Counter-Reformation, 16th-17th century.

The historical ‘insurrection’ and schism in the Western European Church is identified as the protestant Reformation. It originated in a growing unrest and disagreement within the Church at the end of the 15th, early 16th century. The culmination of the growing contradictory developments in the Catholic Church, led to the public protest of the Augustine monk Martin Luther, in Germany. It is not our intention to provide a brief cause and history of the Reformation, but to briefly show how deeply it affected and impacted development of the Catholic catechesis and the role of catechist. About eight years after his excommunication Martin Luther produced a catechism. He considered his small Catechism as the most important of his writings! Luther understood the importance of a family and therefore his catechism was orientated around the family. It became parents’ responsibility to teach their children about the faith from the catechism. This might be considered as one of the turning points, where lay parents became a centre of learning about the faith and doing catechesis. Their role in transmission of the faith to their children became paramount. The mother would usually become the teacher of the faith in the family. Luther’s method of repetition and memorisation became the definitive model for learning the faith for many years to come¹⁸.

The Catholic Church now had to produce something new and different to respond to Luther’s directions taken in Christianity. The Counter-Reformation, initiated with the Council of Trent, was the starting point of a historical change. Not only were the “errors” of the Reformation clarified and condemned, but the Catholic Church also initiated a fundamental renewal, considering the already widespread shifts introduced by Modernity. The new role of catechist and a lay teacher in Catholic schools, family and the parish played an important role for several decades contributing solidly to the historical development of the renewed Catholic Church after the Trent. One of the most important Catholic catechisms writers of this period was by St. Peter Canisius. His catechism became the most widely read in the world¹⁹.

¹⁸ *Ibidem.*

¹⁹ See: [_journals_qua_36_1-2_article-p51_6-preview.pdf](#), Acc. 12.08.2021

4. Changing society initiating a new period in Catechesis: *The Catechism of the Council of Trent* (1566) and *The Catechism of The Catholic Church*, (1992).

The Roman Catechism of Trent had been produced in 1566. It was compiled under the direction of St. Charles Borromeo and recognized as one of the most authoritative Catholic catechisms²⁰. It was seen as such an important document of the Church, that Pope Leo XIII recommended two books - *The Summa* and *The Catechism of Trent* - for all seminarians! Pope Benedict XVI, as a Cardinal, called it “the most important Catholic Catechism”²¹. Originally designed to supply parish priest with an official book of instruction, it has been used extensively by the laity as a steadying guide in our confused age²². “In the mid 16th century, Archbishop of Milan, Charles Borromeo, established Confraternity of Christian Doctrine, which set up several schools in Milan to provide religious education for children, young people, and uneducated adults. (...) In 1584, there were 3000 lay teachers working with more than 40 000 children and adults in the schools in Milan.”²³. This was a successful start of religious orders followed by lay Christian educationists to set up a new style school of religious education and catechesis.

The Jesuit Order was established by St. Ignatius of Loyola. Jesuits played an important role in the Counter-Reformation. The Jesuit Order helped to carry out the two major objectives of the Counter Reformation: Catholic education and missionary work²⁴. Growing in numbers and devotion in following Jesus Christ, Jesuits spread the Word of God across Europe and beyond it. They established numerous schools and universities throughout Europe, helping to maintain the relevance of the Catholic Church in increasingly secular and Protestant societies²⁵. In the long run, they converted millions of people to Catholicism around the world. Their contribution alongside St. Canisius’ writing of the catechism and teaching of the Catholic faith to the counter-reformation was the most significant action in the Church.

Various new methods have been developed and used to reach out to children and uneducated adults. They all recognised a need to adapt religious education to the ages and abilities of the

²⁰ “The Catechism of the Council of Trent”, by Council of Trent (Author), Catholic Church (Author), John A. McHugh & Charles J. Callan (Translators). Paperback: January 1, 1982. Publisher: TAN Books, March 4, 2009.

²¹ *Ibidem*.

²² *Ibid*.

²³ <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Saint-Charles-Borromeo>. Acc. 05.08.2021.

²⁴ <https://www.britannica.com/event/Counter-Reformation>. Acc. 11.08.2021.

²⁵ *Ibidem*.

pupils. Teachers and catechists were to be examined before being allowed to teach. The VOCATION of the catechist became a core to the success of evangelisation and catechesis. Numerous vocational educational orders have been founded in the Church in the following centuries.

4.1 The contextual model of De La Salle's initiative in the late 17th and early 18th century

One of these orders, I would like to focus on, is De la Sallian brothers. The order that had been founded by French priest, later known as St. Jean-Baptiste de la Salle. He founded the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian School. De la Salle is also considered the founder of the first Catholic schools in Europe. He dedicated his life to education of poor people and is known as a reformer of Christian education in early 18th century. On May 15, 1950, Pope Pius the XII pronounced him the patron saint for teachers of youth. The focus of the congregation was teaching poor and 'lost' children²⁶. The emergence of De la Salle's initiative was a common development of the post-Reformation Church. De La Salle implemented the Council of Trent in the French Church. He initiated lay man teachers into the 'ministry' of being Christian educators. They had to undergo a discernment period to prove that they had a VOCATION to Catholic faith education. De la Salle himself fully devoted his spiritual life and gave his full pastoral commitment to nurturing education in schools, which was aligned with four characteristic decisions:

1. *He had a clear vision of what nurturing education in schools should pursue. Original sin forms a fatal obstacle to the Christian development of children and young people. They need redemption. That is what he aimed to pursue through religious education that was firmly rooted in dogma, through a sacramental ecclesial life, through concrete moral behaviour, and through a secular education that prepared pupils for their professional lives, so they can get a job.*
2. *A new kind of teacher was the central axis of his school model. People become teachers because they follow a DIVINE CALLING. He thought of his schools as God's work. Integrity and devotion would guarantee the quality of the education offered.*
3. *He opted for laymen who committed themselves to the Christian education of children. Within the Church, they occupied a distinct position. They were neither members of the clergy nor monks or ordinary laypeople.*
4. *He developed a particular school pedagogy that drew its power and quality from the integration of a personal life of faith and the pedagogical task. This led to a reliable and credible model in which the teachers could flexibly be employed anywhere. The system was thus able to expand and reinforce itself very quickly²⁷.*

All these elements of the four main principles in the catechetical approach of the De la Salle congregation, nicely coincides with the current establishment of the role of catechist within

²⁶ H. Lombaerts, *Lasallian Charism*, Leuven, Belgium, 08.04.2018, Art. p.3.

²⁷ H. Lombaerts, "Lasallian Charism", Leuven, Belgium, 08.04.2018, Art. pp.3-4.

the Church. The role of catechist must be a vocation, a Divine calling, and, therefore, needs discernment and the Church's blessing. It also must be a preparation for mission.

This was a period of great renewal of the Church in handling faith to the people of God delivered by clergy, people of consecrated life as well as lay educationists. The Catechism of Trent was an inspiration for many heroic religious and lay people to commit themselves to the new Catholic education. It was a period of great saints and remarkable educationists. The catechism of the Trent was the last major catechism of the Catholic Church until after the promulgation of *the new Catechism of The Catholic Church* in 1992.

4.2 The kerygmatic movement in catechesis: mid 20th century.

In the mid of the 20th century the kerygmatic understanding of catechesis had been developed. It identifies the catechist as a witness of faith. The catechesis had to focus upon the person of Christ as the Good News. The catechist then must witness the living Christ among the Christians. This kerygmatic movement – about Christian faith as the “good news”, initiated a more open and more contemporary interpretation of religious education. However, the radical changes in society of the second half of the 20th century would challenge the kerygmatic teaching tradition in the Church. It coincided with the start of the societal changes often identified as an open and rapid liberalisation and secularisation of the society. This new challenge calls the catechists to look for new methods for catechesis. A person-orientated and context-focussed educational approach was developed for this purpose at the end of the 20th and the start of the 21st century. A well-defined and lived Catholic identity of a catechist became of paramount importance in the today's world.

5. Why is recognition of the vocation of the catechist so important today?

A particular challenge for catechesis and evangelisation in the post-Vatican II era in the Western Catholic Church is the ‘great exoduses’ of the faithful from the Church. This is especially evident in reduced or even abandoned religious attendance and practices among young adults in the Church. Statistics from the World value and the European value surveys, conducted over the past four decades, have indicated a significant increase in the percentage of young adults who claim to have no appreciation for Christian values and its symbolism. Nor do they have allegiance to, or identify with, a Christian faith tradition²⁸. When looking

²⁸ Cf. *European Value Survey* 2004-2008. Also see: *Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life*, ‘U.S. Religious Landscape Survey: Religious Beliefs and Practices’ (Washington, D.C.: Pew Research Center, 2008); Also see: P. Jones, *Exodus: Why*

back at all the numerous efforts to attempt to canvas this ‘great exodus’ from the Church, my own professional experience very much agrees with the following reflection of Pope Francis in *Evangelii Gaudii*, when he invites ‘everyone to be bold and creative in the task of rethinking the goals, structures, style and methods of evangelization’, by allowing ‘the flock to strike out on new paths’ and advance ‘along the path of a pastoral and missionary conversion, which cannot leave things as they presently are’ (EG, 43,49, 83). This calls us to look for some innovative ways to see how to make our Christian faith meaningful to those who left the Church or have never been part of it. This situation undoubtedly calls for not only a profession as a catechist but also for people who feel and recognise it as a ‘divine calling’ and a vocation to teach others in the Catholic faith.

Conclusion: Pope Francis’ calling for vocational Catechesis

Lumen Fidei, the first encyclical of Pope Francis, published on 5 July 2013, underscores the essential educational role that sacraments have to a person in the Church. Participation in the sacramental life of the Church is experience of “engaging the entire person, body and spirit, interior life and relationships with others”²⁹. Pope Francis wrote in his *motu proprio Antiquum Ministerium*, that, “The Council Fathers repeatedly emphasized the great need for the lay faithful to be engaged directly, in the various ways their charism can be expressed, in the ‘*plantatio Ecclesiae*’ and the development of the Christian community”³⁰ The recognition of the importance of the role and the vocation of catechist in the Church is a remarkable milestone in the contemporary history of the Church. “It follows that the reception of a lay ministry such as that of Catechist will emphasize even more the missionary commitment proper to every baptized person, a commitment that must however be carried out in a fully ‘secular’ manner, avoiding any form of clericalization”³¹. This statement makes it clear that being lay catechists we must recognise our secular vocation to evangelise and catechise. Lay catechists have always been and should remain an active part of the missionary Church.

Americans are Leaving Religion—and Why They’re Unlikely to Come Back (Washington, DC: Public Religion Research Institute, 2016).

²⁹ Pope Francis 2013b, §40

³⁰ *Antiquum Ministerium*, 2021.

³¹ *Ibidem*.